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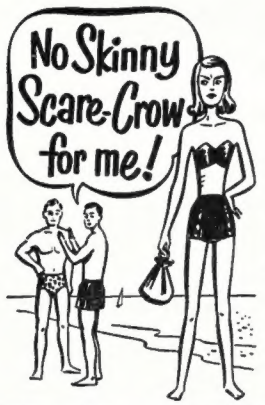

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VOL. 2, NO. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION 1954 EDITION

A Full-Length Novel

BURY ME NOT . . . . . **Allan R. Bosworth** **8**
Sam Karnes kept the peace of a large chunk of Texas in his own peculiar way—a way that worked even when his son-in-law was accused of murder

Two Complete Novelets

MEDICO OF GUN-FLAME BASIN . . . **Larry A. Harris** **80**
Young Doc Cameron writes a kill-or-cure prescription when an epidemic of lead poisoning breaks out in the ranching-mining town called Cochita

CALAMITY ROAD . . . . . **J. Edward Leithead** **106**
A pair of fighting buckskin men team up with Uncle Sam's army to put an Indian sign on a murderous renegade trader who would tolerate no rival

Five Short Stories

RUSTLER MEAT . . . . . **Sam Brant** **6**
Fresh beef the gentle old Sky Pilot wanted and a side of beef he got!

SOUTH TO THE SUN . . . . . **William Hopson** **69**
A deputy sheriff matches his death-dealing Colts against printer's ink

CAVALRY CAL'S CRUSADE . . . . . **Leslie Ernenwein** **97**
They figured him an old wind-bag until he punctured some bank robbers

GOLDY THE GUNHAWK . . . . . **W. F. Bragg** **131**
He was young for a law-dog until the Rangers loaned him the right tools

YOU CAN'T TELL FROM SIZE . . . . . **J. R. Jackson** **139**
It was sheer heresy in cow-country, yet Bowie wanted to be a railroader

Features

THE BEST OF THE WEST . . . . . **An Editorial** **11**

RANGE RAMBLINGS . . . . . **Harold Helfer** **45**

A WESTERN TRAGEDY . . . . . **Edna Stewart** **65**

MORRIS OGDEN JONES, *Editor*

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How I foxed the Navy

by Arthur Godfrey

The Navy almost scuttled me. I shudder to think of it. My crazy career could have ended right there. Who knows, I might still be bumming Chesterfields instead of selling them.

To be scuttled by the Navy you've either got to do something wrong or neglect to do something right. They've got you both ways. For my part, I neglected to finish high school.

Ordinarily, a man can get along without a high school diploma. Plenty of men have. But not in the Navy. At least not in the U. S. Navy Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., back in 1929. In those days a bluejacket had to have a mind like Einstein's. And I didn't.

"Godfrey," said the lieutenant a few days after I'd checked in, "either you learn mathematics and learn it *fast* or out you go. I'll give you six weeks." This, I figured, was it. For a guy who had to take off his shoes to count above ten, it was an impossible assignment.

I was ready to turn in my bell-bottoms. But an ad in a magazine stopped me. Here, it said, is your chance to get special training in almost any subject—mathematics included. I hopped on it. Within a week I was enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools studying algebra, geometry and trig for all I was worth.

Came week-end liberty, I studied. Came a holiday, I studied. Came the end of the six weeks, I was top man in the class. Within six weeks I had mastered two years of high school math, thanks to the training I'd gotten.

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RUSTLER MEAT

A Short Short Story

By SAM BRANT

Fresh Meat Was Manna from Heaven to the Sky Pilot

FROM the valley below, the clatter of hoofs died away as the lean, cold-eyed young horseman pushed his tired mount along the chaparral-cluttered trail. It led upward to the pine-forested hill-top—and safety.

Chuck Marlin's lips twisted in a wry smile as he heard the echoes of sporadic bursts of gunfire which he had successfully escaped.

"That posse'll never ketch me now," he grinned.

Chuck Marlin rode on. For hours he traveled. Night had fallen, the stars were pin points in the blue velvet sky when at last he ambled down into a little valley far from the beaten trails.

The lean, cold-eyed young rustler was dead-tired. For two days and a night he had been without sleep. But most of all, he was hungry.

He pulled up short as a glimmer of light came through the trees.

He got from his pony and stole up to the rear of the camper's wagon from which the light came. His hand tightened on the six-gun. Closer view showed him an aged man seated in the wagon—alone. In his lap was—a Bible!

"A sky pilot!"

The rustler's gun dropped to its holster, but his hand still hovered over it.

Anyhow, this sky pilot hombre had to feed him.

His head appeared at the wagon flap. But if he thought the old man would be frightened by his disheveled appearance, he was mistaken.

"Come right in, son," he said. "Glad to see you. First man I had a chance to talk to in months. Gets right lonesome with only the Book to talk to."

"You et yet?" he added, as though he read his visitor's mind. "Got to be content with beans and bacon, though. Ain't had no fresh meat since I don't know when. I come out here to be alone with nature and the Almighty

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when they thought I was too old to preach the Word any more. It's fine, son, fine, if only sometimes I could get fresh meat."

He talked all the time he prepared the meal. Never in his wicked life had Chuck Marlin ever been made to feel so much at home—as though he were wanted, welcomed. It was a new experience for him. . . .

THE old man was sound asleep when Chuck crept from the shakedown that had been prepared for him. For a long time he rode. He came at last to the range he sought, found the scattered cattle he knew would be ranging through a gulch.

He had to risk the shot, but his rapid butcher work made up for that. With the fresh meat tied to his saddle, he crept back.

The elderly sky-pilot's elated shouts woke him in the morning. The old fellow was hopping around before a haunch of beef hung on a tree limb,

his hands trembling as he shoved under Chuck's nose a note that read: "From a friend."

"I always said the Lord would provide, son!" his cracked voice quivered. "Let us pray, my boy—let us pray and give thanks!"

And in the silence of the valley, rustler knelt beside sky pilot while the old man's quaver lifted to the skies in thanksgiving for—rustler meat.

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Bury Me Not

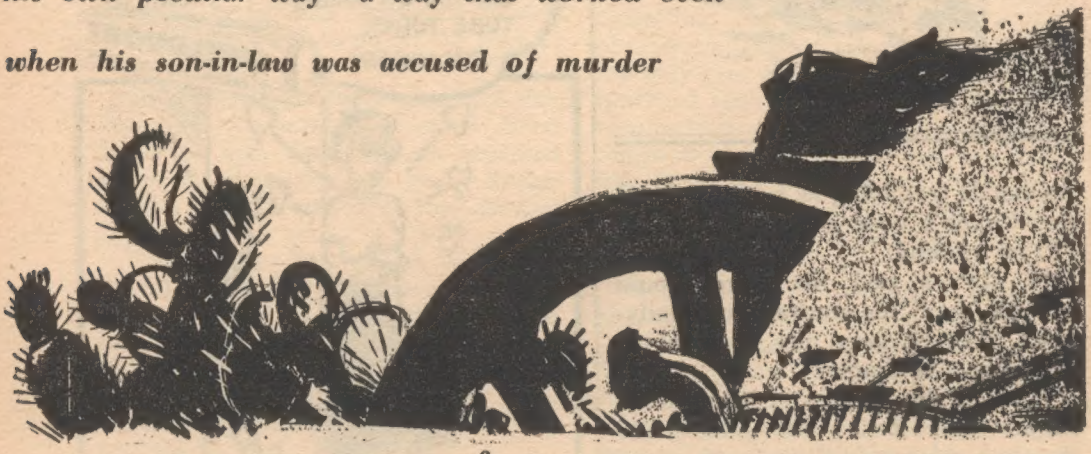
I

TONY CALDWELL'S spurs made music, but his heart was filled with remembered anger and his mind was on the long chance, and he looked not at all like a man going to his own wedding. He had crossed the Rio Grande by moonlight, with Don Enrique's segundo watching from the southern shore and swearing he would shoot anybody who challenged him.

Nobody had, and it was sunrise now, and Tony was

A Novel by ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

Sam Karnes kept the peace of a large chunk of Texas in his own peculiar way—a way that worked even when his son-in-law was accused of murder



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forty miles deeper into Texas, where the cow trails were evasive and the thick chaparral high enough to hide a tall man on a horse.

An inner recklessness rode with him, showing in the way he sat his saddle, easy and loose. It might have been mistaken for joy, but it was a part of his nature, and had nothing to do with any mood, past or present. He had ridden that way through this same brush six months before, after Jud Caldwell—his own father—had sworn out a warrant for his arrest as a horse thief.

He was too young to grow a heavy beard, but what he had was sunburned a reddish mahogany, and he badly needed a haircut. His hat was stained from service as a water bucket for his horse. Brush had snagged the faded ducking jumper he wore, and left its mark on his boots and cowhide leggins.

He drew rein at the top of a rise, and let his horse blow while he rolled a cigarette and watched the light change over the mesquites. The rim-rocked hills of the Clawhammer range came into view, blued by twenty miles of distance, and he could see Hackberry Gap, where the water holes were.

The hills ran all of a level toward the southwest like a rock fence between the new and the old, the law and the wild. Closer at hand, a tin roof on the Mariposa store caught the sun.

Tony spat the taste of alkali dust from his mouth, and licked the cigarette paper. The light grew stronger. Other roofs showed dun and gray in the little town, barely topping the infinite sea of the brush, telling him nothing. The gamble was beginning in earnest now, and the thought of it pleased him almost as much as the knowledge that he would see Mary again in a little while.

HE WAS staking everything on the chance of humbling Jud Caldwell, and he grinned at the idea, because nobody else had ever been able to do it. He smoked the cigarette through while the freshness of the morning softened and mellowed under the sun. He pinched the stub against his saddle-horn, and rode on.

Mariposa was a wide spot on the San Antonio-El Paso stage road, and at this hour only a single ranch wagon and two cowhorses graced its dusty street. Tony noted with satisfaction that the barber was sweeping out for the day's business, and that the store was already open. He got down in front of the stage stand, a low, sprawling adobe with brush corrals at the side and rear, and strode into the combination office and lunchroom.

The place appeared deserted, but stomach-searching aromas of fried bacon and boiling coffee came out of the kitchen. Tony rapped on the counter. A short man emerged, sleeves rolled high on his hairy arms. He carried a cup of coffee in one hand, and a saucer in the other.

"Howdy, Jake," Tony said.

Jake regarded him with round blue eyes, and breathed noisily, like a man not yet awake. Then he put the cup and saucer carefully on the counter, and grinned.

"Look like you been staying out with the dry cattle, Tony," he said. "I figured things would blow over if you gave 'em time."

"They haven't," Tony said briefly. "What time's the west-bound stage?"

"About an hour and a half," said Jake. He poured coffee into the saucer, and blew little ripples across it, studying the younger man through the steam. "Want some breakfast?"

"Not yet. I'm overdue at the barber shop. I'm going to Hackberry on the stage, Jake. Can you keep my horse for awhile?"

"Long as you want," said Jake, and looked out at the animal. "He wearing a Clawhammer brand?"

Tony flushed darkly. "I raised him, and four or five more, and they're

mine! There's a few things—"

"I ain't saying a word," Jake put in hastily. "Just wondered if he was the one. Now listen, Tony. Bart Keyes has been making Hackberry his headquarters. He's got ambitions to be sheriff, and he'll need your pa's backing. You don't want to run into him unless things are fixed up."

"Much obliged," Tony said drily. He went to the door, his head high in the pride of youth and Caldwell blood, and he turned there and grinned at the keeper of the stage stand. "I could use a little of that Jud Caldwell backing myself," he said.

He left his saddle on the sidewalk, and turned the horse into the corral gate. In the tin-roofed store, he bought clothing from the skin out, and went from there to the barber shop.

"Haircut, shave, shampoo and bath," he told the barber. "See if you can make me smell pretty for a change. . . ."

The stage, a three-seated hack drawn by six frisky little Spanish mules, came into Mariposa at a gallop. Tony Caldwell stood by his saddle as Jake ran to open the corral gate. He saw a man on the seat by the driver, and another man—a Mexican—just behind them. His heart sank, and then the team swung wide for the gate, bringing the rear seat into view, showing him the girl in the blue dress.

The driver yelled, "Forty minutes for breakfast!" and jumped down while Jake changed teams.

Tony came smiling through the fogging dust. He held up his arms, and Mary Karnes stepped down into them.

He kissed her as if it had been six years instead of six months, and then held her at arm's length. They looked hungrily at each other; they laughed, and kissed again. Jake came around that way, staring, his arms full of harness, and Tony hurried the girl into the street.

"Haven't got much time, honey," he explained. "I've made a date with

The Best of the West

THE Old West is here to stay, and that's for sure—we were never *more* certain of it than when we were reading for this anthology. There is a timelessness, a feeling of space and grandeur about the West that can only be found in Western fiction.

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This is your West—and mine. It is the heritage and romance of our great country. It is—the Best of the West!

—The Editor

the justice of the peace, and he's waiting at his house. We'll get married, and maybe we'll have time for a wedding breakfast before the stage pulls out."

MARY echoed, "Before the stage pulls out? But I thought we—that you'd have horses or a wagon."

"My bride is going to travel in style. We'll roll into Hackberry on the stage, and get a livery stable rig there, and drive to the ranch."

Mary halted, and looked up at him. The first warm flush of excitement was leaving her cheeks, and worry crept deep into her storm-blue eyes.

"Hackberry?" she said. "Oh, Tony, let's don't go back there! Let's don't go to the Clawhammer!"

"You're afraid of Dad!" he accused, and made an angry, impatient gesture. "I can take care of you, Mary. And I have to have it out with him, sooner or later!"

The girl shook her head. "I'm not afraid of Jud Caldwell," she said slowly. "But he'll either hurt you, or you'll hurt him! And you can't stay there, Tony. The last time, you ran with the wrong bunch after you left. If you felt that you were forced to do that again, I couldn't stand it! I've seen men on the dodge, Tony, and I've seen their wives and children come to the jail after they were arrested, and—"

Her voice trailed off, frightened and small.

She looked up pleadingly, white-faced, and he saw the sunlight caressing red and gold tints in her brown hair. He laughed, and stooped to kiss her again. His arm went around her waist, and he led her up the street. This was part of his gamble. But the stakes were worth it, and with Mary at his side he couldn't lose.

"It won't come to that, honey," he told her. "I didn't put everything into my letters, but I'm holding a trump card, and when I play it, Jud Caldwell will have to call off his dogs. For the first time in his life, he's bit off more'n he can chew."

"How?" Mary challenged.

"His barbed wire. He's gone fence crazy, and sold practically all the Clawhammer stock last fall so he could put the whole ranch under wire. On top of that, he bid on a contract to deliver four thousand head of prime steers in Kansas this summer. That means two trail herds—you can't handle more'n a couple of thousand in one bunch—and he's got to throw 'em on the Trail in the next few weeks."

"He can buy the cattle," Mary said. "He could borrow the money, if it comes to that."

"It's not the money. This has been a bad year for Texas cattle—drought, and die-ups everywhere. Cattle are comparatively scarce. But the main thing is the fact that every other ranchman around here is riled up because Dad fenced the Hackberry waterholes, and because he's served notice that their herds can't cross Clawhammer range. He's got a theory that tick-infested cattle carry the Spanish fever. Northern buyers have been raising the devil about infected herds, and he thinks he can keep the Clawhammer range clean. Anyway, the other ranchmen have formed a combine. They'll see him in hell with his back busted before they'll sell him a cow."

"He can get Mexican cattle," Mary pointed out.

Tony laughed. "Maybe he thinks he can. But Joe Rankin has been down there, lining up all his friends against him. Joe has practically controlled the Mexican market on this part of the river for years."

Mary looked up suspiciously. Tony had worked for Joe Rankin, here in the brush country, before Jud Caldwell set the law on his trail. Rankin had the reputation of dealing in wet stock, and the men who rode for him were wild.

"Joe's all right, honey," Tony said, seeing her glance. "The point is, he's

bidding on that beef contract himself—for which I don't blame him. But this time there's one *ranchero* he can't count on. For the last four months, I've been working for old Enrique Sepulveda. If he hasn't got four thousand head of beef, he can get 'em, and it seems like he took quite a shine to me. He's—"

THE girl put in jealously, "He's also got a beautiful daughter. Oh, I know her, Tony.—She was in the class ahead of me at school."

"Sure." Tony laughed. "Inez. Don Enrique kind of hinted at a match, all right, but I know a girl who's twice as beautiful, and I wasn't interested in anything but his cattle. You see how it is? Joe Rankin can't touch 'em if I talk a deal first. Dad can't touch 'em. Dad's out on a limb. And if he still wants to play rough, I can saw it off from under him!"

She looked up at him again, seeing the bright excitement in his dark eyes, understanding that the desire for revenge against Jud Caldwell ruled him as strongly, perhaps, as his love for her. And she saw, too, that the shadow of the Clawhammer owner's stubborn, unforgiving nature lay across the path of their happiness.

"Maybe," she said doubtfully. "But we could go anywhere else and be happy, Tony. Anywhere, where we could live our own lives!"

Tony halted at a ramshackle paling fence, where a house stood behind a cluster of chinaberry trees. He put his hands on her shoulders, and swung her around to face him, and somewhere in the trees a mockingbird was singing.

"Look, honey!" he said, almost roughly. "I want to own my share of the Clawhammer some day. I want you to be the richest woman in Hackberry County, as well as the happiest and prettiest. So we're going back, and I'll fight it out. And you just come on in here and change your name to Mrs. Tony Caldwell!"

II

SHERIFF SAM KARNES surveyed that morning from a chair tilted against the front of the Hackberry jail, keeping the peace of a large hunk of Texas after a fashion peculiarly his own.

The vantage point commanded everything that happened around the town square. He could sit here and assay the good and evil of what he saw, and he was that kind of man who looks for good in all works. He abhorred violence in all its forms, basically because the very word suggested physical effort, and he had found that soft talk not only turned away wrath, but also saved him considerable exertion.

The sheriff had ridden hard after cattle thieves in his time, but such excursions were contrary to his nature. He preferred the tactics by which he had rounded up the Jessup boys, heading for the Nueces with two hundred head of Clawhammer steers.

On that occasion, the sheriff simply picked the most likely waterhole along the arid route, circled wide and went to it, and took his ease there in the shade. Sure enough, the slower cattle had finally come up, and the Jessup boys, whose tongues were hanging out, too, were susceptible to gentle argument and the barrel of a saddle-gun laid in the crotch of a tree.

Jud Caldwell owned the Clawhammer, and about half the country, and Sam Karnes hoped he would remember those steers when the fall elections came. This time, there would be another candidate.

The sheriff whittled, and gave rein to philosophical thought. A string of freight wagons rolled by, bells on the hame-straps making music. He lost a mental bet on the outcome of a dog fight in the little park of mulberry trees. It was too soft a day to fight, anyway.

Tom Henry, his bony shoulders bowed under the threat of almost cer-

tain bankruptcy, rode in on the creek road, not answering when the sheriff spoke. He turned into the alley beside the High Lonesome Saloon.

Sam Karnes shook his head sympathetically. Just two days before, the Court of Civil Appeals had ruled that Jud Caldwell owned the riparian rights on Hackberry Creek. Jud's wire—it had been cut twice in a month—was therefore legal, and in a dry year this meant ruin for Tom Henry's little Rafter H outfit. And there was no telling what would happen the next time Joe Rankin and his brush country crowd came up with a trail herd, expecting to water at the Hackberry as they had always done.

Things were going that way—open range petering out, barbed wire coming in. The sheriff sighed. He had a vague idea that water was put wherever it was by the Almighty, for everybody to enjoy. But the courts thought otherwise. The court ruling was just another chapter in the growth of the Caldwell cattle kingdom. Tom Henry was only the latest of many smaller operators to be strangled by that growth.

A ranch wagon halted before the Stockman's Bank, across the square. Sam Karnes clicked his knife shut and sat up to watch, suspecting that a beautiful day was going to be spoiled.

That was Jud Caldwell getting out—a heavy, wedge-shaped man who stamped on the earth when he walked, as if he owned all of it instead of only a hundred sections; an unreasonable man, worth a lot of money, good years, and still given to raising unholy ructions over small, picayunish things. He was always wanting the law on somebody, like the time he had sworn out a warrant against his own son when the boy left home after a fight.

You could hear Jud a mile away when he was in a temper, and he was in one now. He shook the bank's front door, but nobody opened it, although the sheriff had seen Troy Holcomb going in there earlier to work on his loan accounts. Jud kicked the door, and then stamped down the street and went into the Hackberry Mercantile store, bellowing something about a carload of barbed wire.

The San Antonio-El Paso stage whirled in to stop at the hotel. Sam Karnes yawned, and checked that off the morning, and gauged the progress of the sun toward his chair. When the shade ran out, it would be dinner time. His wife, Ivy, was the best cook in seven counties. He shut his mind against Jud's sound and fury, and dozed.

NEXT thing he knew, the sun was warm on his boots, and a girl's voice was calling:

"Dad! Dad—wake up!"

The sheriff blinked. He got out of his chair with all the ungainly power of a bear, and gave his daughter a bear hug. He was a long-waisted, oversized man, uncommonly tall despite a slouch. A cartridge belt, loops and holster empty, sagged forward from his hips as if its principal function was to support a comfortable paunch. He had a wide and amiable mouth, partly covered by a mustache, and an unruly shock of rough white hair.

And somehow—he never looked at her without mild amazement—Sam Karnes had fathered this slender, spirited girl of nineteen, much too pretty to be any kin. He squeezed her again, and held her off to admire a dark blue dress that came in tight at the waist, making her look about as big around as a cinch ring. And then he saw the fright in her storm-blue eyes.

"Why, Mary!" he said softly. "Anything wrong at school?"

"No, Dad," she said, and her chin came up, quivering. "I quit school. I came out from San Antone on the stage, and got off at Mariposa this morning and—and got married there. To Tony Caldwell."

The sheriff said, "Tony Caldwell!" and sank back to the chair, needing

time to digest all that the name meant.

He put aside the sudden realization that Mary was a woman grown and could marry whom she pleased. He was not thinking of Tony's wildness, or the probability that he would be a rich man some day. Instead, he looked at the store across the square, and thought, Now here's something Jud will sure enough raise the devil about!

Then he smiled, because Mary was dangerously near to tears.

"Well, that's fine, honey, just fine!" he said. "Happy?"

"I—I begged Tony not to come back here," Mary faltered. "But he thinks Jud Caldwell needs him bad enough to call it quits, and—and Tony is full of Caldwell stubbornness, too. I'm afraid there'll be a fight. Will you go out to the ranch and stop it, Dad?"

"Where's Tony now?"

"At the livery stable, hiring a rig. Don't tell him I asked you to go. But maybe Jud would listen to you, Dad. I remember his bragging that he put you in office."

The sheriff nodded, and rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. There was truth in what Mary had said, and it would be just as easy for Jud Caldwell to nail his official scalp to the Clawhammer barn, too, when election rolled around.

He looked up at the girl from under shaggy white brows. She was stubborn, too. It was a trait she had inherited from Ivy. With or without Jud Caldwell's blessing, this marriage likely need help. Sooner or later, it faced a conflict of wills.

"I can ride out that way, casual-like," he said. "But Jud's in town now, Mary, and he's already got his back up a mile. Maybe it wouldn't be a good idea for 'em to meet here."

Mary shivered. "Oh, no—not in public! If he had just listened to me, if he hadn't come back at all! Is that Ranger around?"

"Bart Keyes? No, he's out of town till tomorrow. But if Jud don't bury the hatchet, Tony will have to keep clear of Keyes. I told Jud a long time back that I wouldn't touch that warrant against Tony. I told him anybody who'd worked on the Clawhammer as long as Tony did, without regular wages, sure ought to have a horse and saddle comin' to him. But Keyes is different."

"There are five other saddle horses at the ranch," Mary said. "Tony raised them, and he wants to get them. And with all the horses Jud Caldwell's got, he would't miss the five."

"No, but he'll holler his head off and claim they're his, same as he did the one Tony rode off on," Sam sighed. "Go on in back and break the news to your mother, honey. And then get Tony out of town."

HE STAYED where he was, so Ivy and Mary could shed a few womanly tears. He saw Jud Caldwell cross the street at the far corner, and storm into the boot shop of Fritz the Dutchman.

"Look here, you cussed four-eyed, bald-headed jackass!" he heard Jud yell. "How long you been making my boots? Twenty years! If you had the brains promised a half-witted tumblebug, you'd know any size! These are too tight!"

Fritz's excited accent rose and was drowned. Jud would have his money back. He'd fire any man of his crew who patronized Fritz. He'd damn well see that the town had a bootmaker who knew his trade!

Sheriff Karnes was chuckling in spite of himself when Mary came out, hugged him hastily, and hurried across the square. He sat down to dinner in their living quarters back of the jail when she came back, pleased at the moist shine in Ivy's eyes, amused at the boot shop row. Like most men who spend their lives in the saddle, Jud Caldwell was vain about his small feet. He wouldn't admit that he had grown older and heavier, and needed a larger size boot.

"Tight boots," Sam said philosoph-

ically, "could have been back of a lot of Jud's meanness. A man just naturally ain't human when his feet hurt."

"Humph!" said Ivy. "Jud Caldwell never was human. I knew that twenty years ago, when he buried his wife in that old horse trough. And when he treated her sister like he has, after bringing her out here to raise his kids."

Sam buttered another biscuit. "Wasn't an old trough, Ivy. It was brand new. Rained so much that fall, the freight wagons couldn't come through. And there wasn't a piece of milled lumber in town, let alone a coffin."

"You always take up for Jud," Ivy accused. "He could have got a decent coffin later—a gold one, with his money! And he ought to have married Miss Callie. If she was good enough to spend twenty years of her life mothering Tony and Betty, and keeping his house—"

There was a roar at the door. "Sam! Sam Karnes!"

"Coming!" the sheriff called. "Speak of the devil!" he told Ivy softly. "You stay here and finish your dinner."

He went to the door, suppressing a smile at the secret he knew, respecting the man who stood there, and still dreading to see him. Jud expected loyalty as his due, because he was Jud Caldwell. It was the same trait that had made him keep his son working on the Clawhammer for years without paying him wages.

He stood in the sun, a heavy-jowled, dark-faced man wearing an expensive hat and the forty-dollar boots that pinched his feet, and dressed in between like any of his cowhands. A rusty old black vest sagged unbuttoned from his wide shoulders, the tag of a tobacco sack dangling from an upper pocket. Brown ducking pants were belted low on his waist, and he carried a pearl-handled revolver.

"Come in, Jud," Sam invited. "You're just in time to eat."

"Ain't hungry," Caldwell snapped. His black brows met, and he fidgeted driven by a restless energy. He said, "Three things, Sam. I'm going to Judge Parker to swear out a warrant, and I want you to throw Tom Henry in jail. Then jump out to Hackberry Creek. Joe Rankin's bringing up a trail herd, and you'll have to see that he don't cut my wire and water there. And then I want you to be ready to enforce a foreclosure on Wade Magill. By glory, I'll show 'em all who's running this county!"

Sam blinked at the apoplectic color rising in Jud's thick neck.

"Now, wait a minute, Jud," he counseled. "One thing at a time. What's Tom Henry done?"

"Threatened my life—that's what! He's over in the saloon, getting tanked up on forty-rod, telling everybody he ought to kill me for robbing him and Magill and Joe Rankin of their water rights. Joe Rankin—why, everybody knows he swings a wide loop and packs a running iron! Him talking about water rights!"

"Well," Sam said cautiously, "nobody ever caught Joe at it. But I'll drop over and talk to Tom."

"Talk to him?" Caldwell shouted. "Talk to him? You do too damned much talking, and not enough arresting!"

"There's other ways of handling a man, Jud."

"Yes, and there are other sheriffs, too!" Caldwell glared at him, and breathed hard. "I hear Bart Keyes aims to quit the Ranger service and run for this job. He's a good man. He's got sand in his craw. And by godfrey, Sam, if you don't get off the seat of your britches and quit being so softhearted, you're plumb liable to find yourself between a rock and a hard place!"

HE JERKED the tobacco from his pocket and rolled a cigarette. Sam Karnes drew a long breath.

"I kind of like being sheriff, Jud," he said softly. "Hate to go back to

punching cows, at my age. But while I've got the job, I'll run it my way—not yours, or anybody else's. Sure you get the warrant, and I'll have to arrest Tom. But he's just blowing off steam. Now, why don't you come in and set for awhile? Have a cup of coffee, pull off them tight boots and relax a bit."

Caldwell looked at him in sudden furious exasperation, as if resenting anybody's knowing that his feet hurt.

"Thunderation!" he exploded, throwing the unlighted cigarette against the wall, and turning to stamp angrily into the street. "I'll get that warrant!" he flung over his shoulder. "And I'll have a little talk with Bart Keyes!"

Ivy came to the door and stood at Sam's side.

She was a pleasingly rounded

The sheriff found the body of Jud Caldwell lying there

woman with a young-looking face, and a serenity that was enhanced by the gray in her dark hair, and there were times when it suited her to let Sam think he was the boss.

The sheriff looked at Jud Caldwell's broad back, and shook his head wonderingly.

"There he goes!" he said, as if to himself. "Can't set down, can't let people alone. If he ain't working on a big deal, he's got his fingers on a dozen little ones. And still, he's a mighty big man, and I reckon there'll be a monument to him in the park, some day. Founder of the town of Hackberry. First man around here to take a herd up the Trail. First man to see that open range is dying out, and know what barbed wire meant."

"I heard what he said about Bart Keyes," Ivy answered drily. "If you ask me, the whole county would be better off if that monument was already there—with Jud Caldwell under it!"

III

KARNES pulled down the brim of his battered old white hat, and crossed the little park in the direction of the High Lonesome. It was after one o'clock, and Mary and Tony, he thought, would be out on the road to the Clawhammer. He would go out there himself, in a little while, to face whatever unpleasantness attended Jud's return, although as yet he had no idea how Tony's problem should be handled.

He paused outside the saloon's swinging doors. Inside, Troy Holcomb was talking earnestly. Troy had a deep, friendly voice, and none of the coldness you expected from bankers.

"Cut out the tough talk before the wrong people hear you!" Troy was saying. "There's only one thing you can do, Tom. Get together with Wade Magill and Joe Rankin, and hire a smart lawyer. Take the case to the Supreme Court."

"Court, your grandmother!" Tom Henry answered thickly. "Got about as much chance in court as a belch in a whirlwind!"

"All right. Gamble on drilling a deep well and putting up a windmill. You mark my words—windmills are going to revolutionize cattle business!"

Tom laughed shortly. "Wade Magill's down three hundred feet. What's he struck? Blue mud! It costs money. And I'd die of thirst drinking the water a windmill can pump!"

The sheriff moved inside and saw them—Tom Henry, leaning lank and disconsolate on the bar, hat shoved back so that strands of straight black hair fell over his eyes; Troy Holcomb, the Stockman's Bank land and cattle loan expert, beside him. Holcomb was about forty, a small man who always looked as neat as his ledger figures, wearing a coat and a stand-up collar, and buttoned shoes.

"Listen, Tom," Holcomb said. "Windmills—" He saw the sheriff, and stopped. "Sam, you try talking to Tom. I've got to get back to the bank. He's been making some pretty rash statements."

"Heard about 'em," said Sam. "So has Jud—Make mine a bottle of beer."

Holcomb looked at his watch and hurried out with a meaning jerk of his head toward Tom Henry. The Rafter H owner glowered at his reflection in the mirror.

"Don't give a hoot who heard me!" he asserted. "Said I ought to blow a hole through Jud, before he busts up any more little chicken-feed outfits like mine. And, by godfrey, maybe I will!"

The sheriff drank from the bottle. "No," he said softly. "No, you ain't that big a fool, Tom. You're going back to the ranch, right now."

Tom Henry considered this briefly, then swung around, his eyes wavering and settling on the sheriff.

"Nobody eats enough beans to tell me what I'm going to do!" he said. "Not even you, Sam. You make tracks

out of here while you can still walk!"

The gun was out of his holster before Sam Karnes pushed himself away from the bar. The sheriff moved fast for so big a man. He came in close, and twisted Tom's wrist gently but firmly, and handed the gun to the bartender.

"Shucks, now, Tom!" he reproved. "That wasn't you talking. That was the liquor. You go out home, and lock the door so's you won't fall off the gallery, and get just as orey-eyed as you please. I figure there's times in every man's life when he either has to get drunk, or set down and cry. Things look better afterward."

Tom Henry's face worked with self-pity.

"I'm a friend of yours, Tom," the sheriff said. "I don't like to arrest anybody. It makes extra work for Ivy, having to cook."

Tom nodded. "That's right," he agreed. "I don't want to make work for Ivy. But things are mighty rocky, Sam."

He put his head down on the bar, and began to cry. The sheriff winked at the bartender.

"Get him on his horse," he said. "Quicker he leaves town, the better."

When he went out on the street again, he felt a little glow that could hardly have come from one bottle of beer. Jud's team was still switching flies in front of the Stockman's Bank; everything looked peaceful.

SHERIFF KARNES killed an hour whittling on the arm of a chair on the shaded hotel gallery, then went to the stable behind the jail and saddled his horse. Ivy found him there, and her face was no longer serene.

"You ought to have followed Jud Caldwell!" she said. "He ran into Tony at the bank, and there must have been a fight. Jud's got a black eye. And he says—"

"Good for the boy!" Sam grinned. Maybe now Jud will know Tony's grown up."

Jud wouldn't talk about the fight," Ivy went on angrily. "He said if you wouldn't arrest Tony on that old warrant, he'd find Bart Keyes and see that Bart did it. He said he'd have the marriage annulled. Oh, I was afraid of this when Mary told me she'd married Tony!"

Hell's fire!" the sheriff exclaimed. "Tony's twenty-four, and Jud can't annul the marriage. I'll go out to the ranch and get Tony to leave before anything else happens."

"Yes," Ivy said with a grimace. "And here—here's the warrant for Tom Henry's arrest. . . ."

You put big Sam Karnes into a saddle, and some of the awkwardness left him, and he attained a sort of grace. He still slouched, but his riding was effortless, and showed consideration for his horse.

He traveled southwest on the creek road, going slowly so he wouldn't overtake Tom Henry. When he had crossed the divide and neared the live-oak mottes that shaded the Hackberry waterholes, he felt sure that Tom was safe at the Rafter H.

The road forked here. The left-hand branch crossed the dry creek bed below the waterholes, and just below Jud Caldwell's fence, turning up into the mesquite flat on the farther side. The Rafter H lay over that way, with Wade Magill's four sections adjoining it on the north, and open range and the beginning of the wild brush country to the south and west of both.

Sam Karnes could see that things were rocky, indeed, for the small ranchers. It was only late March, but whirlwinds already twisted slender spirals of dust through the flats, a sure sign of continued drought. The curly mesquite grass was brown, and crisp enough to shatter under a horse's hoofs. It was the kind of year when even Jud Caldwell would find himself poorer.

The sheriff took the right-hand road, letting himself into the Claw-

hammer boundary gate just as the sun dropped behind the rimrocks. He passed Miss Callie Davis's cottage as darkness fell, and then a full moon came up and showed him the Clawhammer corrals a quarter of a mile farther on. When he reached there he stepped down and unsaddled.

The bunkhouse was dark and quiet. Rocky Morse, Jud's foreman, and the seven or eight men Jud kept at the headquarters ranch would be out with the chuckwagon, starting the roundup on the open range. The western boundary fence had not been completed, and Clawhammer cattle still strayed.

Sam Karnes walked up to the house, and heard angry voices inside as he entered the yard. He hesitated, wondering if Jud had somehow got here first. The gate latch clanged behind him, putting a stop to the argument. He stepped on the long gallery, and Miss Callie came to the door, peering out where the lamplight threw its yellow rectangle.

"That you, Jud?" she asked, and her voice was sharp with fear.

"No—it's me. Sam Karnes."

"Dad!" Mary cried, and ran out on the gallery. "I'm so glad you're here!"

Miss Callie stood aside, looking sourly at the sheriff as she smoothed her apron with bony, nervous hands. She was past fifty, spare and angular, with lank gray hair knotted at the back of her head, and tight lines in her sallow face. Sam Karnes thought he had never seen a woman so severely marked by spinsterhood.

"Well, whose side *you* taking, Sheriff?" she demanded abruptly.

"Why, I don't exactly like to take sides in a case like this," Sam evaded. "Mary being my daughter and all, I aim to be neutral."

"No, of course not!" Miss Callie said tartly. "Jud Caldwell owns the law, like he owns everything else!"

TONY CALDWELL came out of the kitchen just then, wearing leggins and spurs, walking curiously like Jud walked.

"You keep quiet, Aunt Callie!" he said, and turned to face Sam.

His lips were bruised, but he smiled with that reckless quirk on his mouth, and there was a challenge in his eyes. Sam Karnes put out his hand.

"Well, son," he said, "maybe you don't need any help—unless I have to protect you from this daughter of mine. But I had a little business out this way."

"You mean a warrant for Tom Henry?" Tony asked bitterly. "I heard about it in town. Why in hell can't Dad leave people alone?"

Miss Callie sniffed. "Because he's a Caldwell, that's why! And you're just as bull-headed. You're as like him as two peas in a pod. You and Mary not married a day, and quarreling already!"

She stalked out to the kitchen, leaving a strained silence. Sam glanced from Tony to Mary, and saw tear-stains on his daughter's cheeks.

"Pshaw!" he said softly. "About what?"

"Tony's going to work for Joe Rankin again," Mary said stiffly. "If he runs with that brush country crowd, he'll land in jail!"

Tony paced the floor restlessly.

"Sam," he said, "there's no use fooling myself. I thought I had Dad where I wanted him. But he didn't even give me a chance to talk!"

"There are honest outfits," Mary said.

"You've heard the stories Dad spreads," Tony said evenly. "I worked for Joe two months before I went to Mexico, and I never saw anything crooked. He's fixed about like Dad was here, fifteen years ago. All open range. Wild cattle still in the brush, belonging to anybody who can rope them. Sure a few unbranded yearlings drift down there from every ranch west of San Antone, along with the branded strays, and Joe slaps his iron on any he can find. Dad did the

same, and so will I. And Joe being close to the river, he gets the blame when stock is rustled.

"Anyway"—Tony faced Sam Karnes, driving a fist into his palm—"if it's got to be war between me and the Clawhammer, I aim to line up with the outfit that can do Jud Caldwell the most harm!"

IV

THE sheriff rolled a cigarette and considered Tony's defiance, trying not to see the unhappiness in Mary's eyes. He knew now that there was more than wildness in Tony's nature. The boy had inherited some of Jud's tenacity, his relentlessness.

The Clawhammer and Joe Rankin had always been at odds—Rankin had beaten Jud in a few Mexican cattle deals, and the sheriff knew that Jud had fenced the water holes partly in spite. Tom Henry's range lay between the two big outfits like a buffer state, but now Tom would be forced to sell

to one or the other, and the trouble would be intensified.

"Well," Sam said finally, "I keep my nose out of another man's business, where I can. But I wouldn't hang around here any longer than I had to, if I was you. You got your horses?"

"I'll get 'em tomorrow," Tony said. "But Joe Rankin's camped down the line with a trail herd. I'm riding down there now to talk business with him."

He bent over Mary's chair, but she barely allowed his lips to brush her cheek, and he straightened, hesitating. The sheriff gave him an almost imperceptible nod, and led the way outside.

"Wind in the southwest," he observed, stepping off the gallery. "Ring around the moon. Could bring rain." Then, still looking at the stars, he lowered his voice. "Son, I went through the same kind of thing with her mother, twenty years ago. You got to have an understanding. It may hurt, but you got to make it plain who wears the pants. . . ."

Betty Caldwell had been horseback riding, and she came up from the corrals just as Tony left. She was a little older than Mary, with hazel eyes and coppery hair, and a wistful smile, slow and sweet. It wouldn't be long, Sam told himself, before Jud would raise the roof about her choice of a husband, no matter who the man was.

Miss Callie called them in to supper, and although she was a good cook, the meal was not pleasant. Mary had lapsed into a hurt silence, and the whole house seemed gripped by a tenseness against its owner's return. Miss Callie fidgeted from the stove to the door, smoothing her apron and listening for the sound of wagon wheels. At the end of the meal, she lighted a lantern and announced that she was going to her cottage.

"If Jud stays this late," she said, "he usually stays in town. Betty, honey, never mind the dishes. I'll do them in the morning."

The others sat for awhile in the living room, but nobody was in a conversational mood. Betty showed the sheriff to a spare room that opened on the gallery, and he went to bed.

It was some time past midnight when he woke with a start. The moonlight was on his pillow, and a woman's voice, high and edged with hysteria, was screaming incomprehensible things. He pulled on trousers

and boots, and hurried out on the gallery.

Miss Callie was coming through the yard, her lantern making a jerky circle of light. She collapsed moaning on the gallery steps.

"My coffin—my coffin!" she cried. "Somebody has stolen my coffin!"

Everything about this had the quality of nightmare, and Sam Karnes stared, disbelieving. Betty came out, wearing a robe and carrying a blanket, and the sheriff helped Miss Callie up. The moonlight was on her gaunt shoulders, and she made a sepulchral figure in her nightgown, with blowing strings of gray hair about her face.

"My coffin!" she wailed again. "Everybody knew I set store by it!"

Betty put the blanket around her, and shook her slightly.

"Now, aunt Callie!" she reasoned. "You just dreamed it."

"No, I didn't! It wasn't a dream. Somebody took it, and me likely to go at any time!"

The sheriff said, "*Coffin?* What on earth was she doing with a coffin?"

Nobody answered. Betty called for Mary to put a kettle on the stove so they could make Miss Callie a pot of tea.

"I don't want any tea!" Miss Callie said. She drew a shuddering breath, and was suddenly calmer. She faced the sheriff. "Why would anybody steal it? What good is it to anybody but me?"

SAM KARNES shook his head.

"I don't know, Miss Callie. Now where was it, and when did you see it last?"

"It was in my parlor. I dusted it today about one o'clock, when I took down the curtains and washed them. Tonight, after I ironed the curtains, I took them in the parlor, and it was gone."

"Come in and drink some tea—Mary'll have it ready in a minute," Betty urged. "You'll catch your death of cold."

Miss Callie moaned that it made no difference now, but they went inside. The sheriff followed, and beckoned Betty aside.

"Did she sure enough have a coffin?" he asked incredulously.

The girl hesitated. "Well—yes. She had a spell of sickness five or six years ago, and kept after Dad until he ordered it for her. You see, when my mother—when she died, there wasn't —"

She stopped there, and the sheriff remembered how Jud Caldwell had buried his young wife in a horse trough. He guessed that Miss Callie had neither forgotten that, nor forgiven Jud for it. It was plain that Miss Callie hated Jud Caldwell, but loved his children.

"I know, Betty," the sheriff said quickly. "But who'd steal it? I reckon I'll have to go down there and take a look."

"I'll get dressed and go with you," Betty said. "Mary can put Aunt Callie to bed when she has had her tea."

Miss Callie's house was a four-room cottage, and Betty explained that it had been built when she had come out from East Texas. She was strait-laced, and didn't think it would look right if she lived under the same roof with a widower her own age.

Besides, Jud Caldwell was used to cow camps, and had no patience with the frills a woman liked. There were lace curtains at Miss Callie's windows, and she had planted vines and rose bushes in the yard.

"This is the parlor," Betty said, opening a door off the hall.

The sheriff held up the lantern, and Betty stared at a pair of straight-backed chairs facing each other against the wall.

"Well," she said, "she wasn't dreaming! It's gone."

Sam Karnes looked around a room that smelled of moth balls and furniture polish. It had flowered wallpaper, and a horse-hair sette, and a small foot-pedal organ. Everything

was stiff, and spotlessly uncomfortable. The only dust in the room lay where Miss Callie's coffin had rested on the chair seats.

"You have to know her, to understand," Betty said apologetically. "She always came in here at night and looked at it before going to bed. She said it comforted her."

"H'm!" said Sam Karnes. "I'd sleep better knowing it was gone. Now, let's see. Never had to deal with anything like this." He sank heavily to the settee and rubbed his jaw, making a dry, rasping sound in the room. "I always ask myself four questions about a crime. Why, how, when, and who. You get the first three, and you'd be surprised how often they answer the last one. But the why in this case just don't make sense!"

BETTY shook her head helplessly, and the sheriff rubbed his jaw some more.

"The how," he said. "We'll probably find wagon tracks when it's light. You can't tote away a coffin on horseback, or afoot. The when—it could have been any time at all before she come back down here after supper. That certainly don't help much."

He got up to move about the room with his bearlike shuffle, white eyebrows pulled together in perplexity.

"The who," he said, as if to himself. "Why, hell! Excuse me, Miss Betty. Let's go back to the house. Can't follow a trail tonight."

Long after the house was quiet, Sam Karnes lay listening to the sighing of wind along the gallery.

He was puzzling no more over the coffin's strange disappearance than over what Miss Callie's life had been like there on the Clawhammer. It would take a long and morbid fear to produce a state of mind in which a coffin became a cheering and comforting possession.

He made a cigarette, and smoked it in the darkness, and the words of an old range song ran unbidden through his mind:

It matters not, I've oft been told,
Where the body lies when the heart grows cold.
Yet grant, oh, grant this wish to me—
Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie!

At last he dozed, and there was gray light at the window when the horses nickered at the corrals, and he woke to the sound of gravel crunching under wagon wheels. He rose at once, determined to talk with Jud before Jud could enter the house where Mary was. He closed the door softly, and put on his boots at the steps.

When he reached the corrals, the wagon team stood outside the wide gate, and Jud was nowhere in sight. Sam Karnes went nearer, and saw that the reins were broken and worn from dragging under the horses' hooves.

He whistled softly as his mind probed into the possibilities indicated here. Jud Caldwell seldom drank. He was no psalm singer, but he scorned the weakness some men had for liquor. Still, of course, a man driving home late might fall into a doze, and be bounced off the seat.

V

RIGHT plain, it seemed, there was no use in waking the girls, or frightening them when they were up. The sheriff led the team until the wagon was out of sight behind the barn, then he took the harness off the horses and turned them into the horse trap.

The light was growing as he saddled and rode down the road, watching the little furrow left by the dragging reins.

That way, just before sunup, he came to the water hole mottes. The furrow swung, and fresh wagon tracks turned toward the trees.

Sam drew rein and thought over a cigarette, seeing the morning spill

brightness over everything but the somber stretch beneath the live-oaks, noticing that the wind had died without bringing anything more than a few Gulf clouds. Then he sighed, and rode on, and the rising sun threw a long, mis-shapen shadow before him until he was in the motte.

The first thing he saw there was Miss Callie's coffin. It was black and dusty now; its shiny handles caught the light. The lid lay upside down beside it, and just beyond was a pile of fresh earth.

The sheriff got down, leaving his horse ground-reined a few yards away. The earth was hard here, and brittle dry leaves made crisp sounds under his boots.

By now he suspected what he would find, and still he was unprepared for it—a shallow grave with a spade handle sticking from one corner, and Jud Caldwell's thick body lying face-down, head and arms dangling into the hole. Jud's hands touched the bottom, and one of his legs was drawn up beneath him, as if he had been trying to crawl into the pit with the last of life that was left to him.

The sheriff lifted the dead man's head, and saw the bullet-hole almost squarely between his eyes.

I ought to have arrested Tom Henry, after all! he thought sharply, and stepped back to try bringing this scene into some sort of perspective.

The horror of it crawled slowly into his mind and coiled there, heavy and cold, as he was sweating when he remembered that Tom was not the only man who had been riding this road the previous night.

He shut his eyes, and saw Mary's face, and said aloud, "No—not Tony—not Tony!"

When he looked again, trying to reconstruct the macabre business that had been transacted here, he wondered why the grave had not been finished, and why Jud still lay on top of the ground. Had somebody scared the killer away?

There was no sign of struggle. Jud's pearl-handled pistol was still in his holster, and when Sam Karnes sniffed the muzzle of the gun, he knew it had not been fired recently. Black mud, not quite dry, caked Jud's boots, and the sheriff made one homely observation and filed it away in his mind. Jud's trousers legs were tucked inside the boots that had hurt his feet yesterday.

The mud meant he had been down by the water hole, so the sheriff picked up his trail where the creek bank dropped away too steeply for cattle, close against Clawhammer's southern boundary wire. Three longhorn cattle drinking on the far side of the water hole threw up their heads, letting water drip silver in the sun, and whirled to crash up the western bank. Two of them, the sheriff saw, wore Rafter H brands.

The boot tracks crossed the creek bed and turned upstream on the western side. Here, near a fallen live-oak trunk, they bunched in a little trampled spot, and went no farther.

Sam Karnes looked up on the bank, and saw the strands of barbed wire sagging between the posts. The fence had been cut again.

Tom Henry's house was over yonder, perhaps two miles away; Wade Magill's was up the creek, not much farther. Sam turned his attention to the trampled mud, reading its record with an ease born of following many trails. Jud had squatted by the fallen log for a considerable time—long enough, at least, to smoke four cigarettes halfway through, and drop their stubs. He had been waiting for somebody to pass along that road, to come, perhaps, to cut his wire.

SAM speculated. And whoever it was saw Jud first, in the moonlight. Whoever it was came up through the trees on the east bank, instead. He saw the wagon, and then he saw Jud squatting here. He threw a gun on Jud, and made him march back to the

wagon. Then—

Affairs took their macabre turn then. The killer had been in no hurry. He had made his victim drive to Miss Callie's cottage, and get the coffin. They had come back down here to the somber shadows of the live-oaks, whispering in the lonesome wind.

And Jud Caldwell—the richest, proudest, most powerful man in the county—had been forced to get down from the wagon and dig his own grave!

Sam Karnes's why, how, when and who were not serving him very well as he unrolled the slicker tied behind his saddle, and covered Jud's body with it. He glanced at the tucked-in trouser legs again, and wondered. A man didn't ordinarily dig that way, because it meant the certain discomfort of gravel and dirt falling into his boots.

But Sam couldn't remember how Jud Caldwell usually wore his trousers, whether inside or out of his boots. Besides, Jud might easily forget the minor comforts when he knew he was going to die. The whole observation came to nothing.

The sheriff got on his horse. He rode up through the motte a little way, then turned across Hackberry Creek between the two water holes, crossing the fence where the wire was cut.

Fifty yards farther he came to the wagon road. Dust lay thick in its ruts, but cattle had followed it to water, and any horse tracks made the night before were blotted out.

The "why," Sam told himself, applied strongly enough to Tom Henry. But the "how" didn't. A man in a drunken rage would shoot fast. The killer of Jud Caldwell had taken his time, feeding the cold hunger of his hatred, savoring the taste of revenge. The sheriff could not picture Tom Henry in that diabolical role. He liked Tom, and sympathized with him.

He rounded a hill point, and a dog came braking from the Rafter H yard.

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But there was no saddle horse in the corral, and he shouted Tom's name at the gallery without getting an answer. He tried the door, and found it locked.

This brought a feeling of relief, because the sheriff wasn't ready to arrest anybody yet. He turned back down the road, and continued along it to Wade Magill's place. Coming up through the mesquites, he heard a pulley creaking, and the measured thump of the driller's bit in the earth. Dust rose where a team circled the rig, powering it, and Wade Magill walked out to meet him.

Wade was in his late twenties, a rangy, sandy-haired man with blue eyes crinkled at their corners by Texas sun. He looked up with an odd tightening of those wrinkles when he saw the sheriff.

"Ain't got a foreclosure order for me, have you?" he asked.

"Not yet, Wade," Sam said. "I

didn't know you owed Jud Caldwell anything."

"I don't. The Stockman's Bank holds a mortgage on my four sections. I borrowed money to drill this well and buy a windmill. But Jud encouraged me to take up this land when I was working for him, years ago, and now he claims I agreed to sell it to him when I got title—same as a lot of other people who worked for the Clawhammer and proved up places that adjoined it. I say I didn't make any such agreement. He rode over here day before yesterday, and said he was going to put pressure on the bank."

Sam drew thoughtfully on his cigarette. Little things; picayunish things. Jud Caldwell had needed this four sections of dry land about as much as he needed a third thumb.

"If he wants a fight," Magill went on, "he sure as hell can have it! Four sections ain't much, but it's a start, and if I get water I can spread out to the west. Troy Holcomb promised me the bank would hold off till it sees what a well and windmill can do. If it works, all the dry range is going to be worth more. So"—he grinned at the thought— "Jud may be ridin' for a fall."

"You seen Jud since he was over here?" Sam asked.

"No. Why?"

"He's dead, Wade. Somebody put a bullet between his eyes, down by the water hole."

WADE MAGILL'S mouth opened, and his blue eyes went wide, and then squinted again. "Dead?" he said. "Good God!"

"I haven't been back to tell the kids, yet. Tony's home—or was. He and Mary got married. I thought maybe you could ride into town and tell Judge Parker for me. Coroner's inquest ought to be held out here."

"Why, sure," Wade said. He swallowed, and nodded. "Sure, Sam. God—Jud Caldwell!"

They went down by the live-oak motte a little later, and Wade sat for a moment staring at the scene.

"That's Miss Callie's coffin!" he exclaimed. "I helped unload it when Jud bought it for her. Sam, do you figure *she* could have hated Jud this much?"

"I haven't got that far figuring," Sam said.

"Whoever done it was crazy!" the younger man declared, then added a practical note. "Jud wouldn't fit in that box. His shoulders are too wide!"

When the sheriff got back to Clawhammer, Tony's horse, saddle marks fresh on his back, was rolling in the corral dust. Sam went on up to the yard gate, and Tony and Miss Callie came out on the gallery at the clang of the latch, but neither Mary nor Betty was in sight.

Miss Callie wore one of Betty's calico dresses hung on her gauntness. She twisted her apron as Sam came up the walk.

Then he saw Tony's face, and almost stopped in his tracks. The boy could not have looked more stunned if he had heard the news.

"Whatever's happened to him is the doings of Providence!" Miss Callie said shrilly. "Whatever's happened, he's to blame!"

"Hush, Aunt Callie!" Tony said. He came down the steps, looking tired. He said, "Sam, Mary's left me! She took the livery stable rig before I got back. She and Betty went to town!"

"Pshaw!" said Sam Karnes.

He thought, Stubborn, like her mother was, and sat down heavily on the steps, wishing he had no worries beyond patching up a young lovers' quarrel. There was no reason why Mary and Tony couldn't be happy now. There was some good in everything.

"Did you find Dad?" Tony asked.

The sheriff nodded, and took off his battered hat. Tony read his glance, and went pale.

"I saw the wagon back of the barn,"

he said. "I—I was just getting ready to start along the road, but Mary—I couldn't think. Is he just hurt, Sam?"

VI

AS SIMPLY as he could, Sam Karnes told Tony and Miss Callie. She heard him with dry eyes and a stony, set look. Tony sat with his head lowered, black eyes fixed on the stitch pattern of his boots. Then he got up, not looking at the sheriff, and went quickly into the house.

"Who did it?" Miss Callie asked harshly.

"Somebody who hated Jud a powerful lot. That's all I know."

"That covers half the county," she said drily. "He was that kind of a man. You either had to hate him or love him."

Sam Karnes shot her a quick glance, but she was looking out over the sun-shimmered mesquites.

"Well, now," he said, "I never knew anybody who actually loved Jud. Respect, yes. But the other's different."

"I loved him once," Miss Callie said slowly. "In spite of what he did to my sister, I—I—" And the tight line in her sallow face went suddenly loose.

She buried her face in the starched apron and went groping into the house, her bony shoulders shaking with sobs.

Tony reappeared. He had a six-shooter belted around his waist, and he stamped on the gallery floor as he walked, his head held high again.

"I reckon Tom Henry wasn't just talking, after all," he said, and started down the walk.

"Hold on, son!" Sam called. "I've been to Tom Henry's. He ain't home."

"I'll track him down, wherever he is!"

The sheriff caught him at the gate, and whirled him around with a heavy hand on one wide shoulder.

"Listen to me!" he said firmly. "Maybe Tom did it, and maybe he didn't. *I'll* handle the law in this case. If you want to help, just take off that gun, and cool down. You've got Mary to think about. You got a funeral to arrange. And you ain't working for Joe Rankin now, no matter what kind of deal you made with him last night. You're running the Clawhammer, son. . . ."

Tony and the sheriff unsaddled at the motte to wait for the coroner's party. The sun climbed hot in a windless sky, and it was that sticky kind of day likely to be filled with minor irritations. Clouds of gnats swarmed under the live-oaks, looking for a patch of sweating skin.

Sam Karnes stretched out, using his saddle for a pillow and covering his face with the battered old hat, thinking ironically that he had spent a lot of the county's time waiting at water holes for one thing and another. Tony Caldwell smoked numerous cigarettes, and paced restlessly where he could watch the road.

In early afternoon, two buggies rattled down from the divide, their teams in a lather, and with half a dozen horsemen following far enough behind to escape the dust. Sam Karnes sat up lazily. That was Judge Parker in the first rig, and the manager of the mercantile store in the second, each bringing another one of Hackberry's business men. Looking beyond them, the sheriff saw Bart Keyes on a sorrel horse, talking to Wade Magill.

Karnes glanced thoughtfully at Tony, wondering whether the Ranger would choose to execute the old warrant against the boy. With Jud dead, nobody was left to appear against him, but Keyes was an officious sort, and might want to make the sheriff trouble.

Tony saw the look, and shrugged his wide shoulders.

"To hell with Keyes!" he said in a reckless, bitter tone, and Sam Karnes knew that at the moment Mary was

uppermost in his mind, and that only she mattered.

Then Judge Parker got rheumatically down from his buggy, and Sam stepped out to greet him.

The county judge was well along in years, and the juices of life had literally dried up in him, contributing to an appearance of desiccation, and an uncanny ability to chew tobacco for long courtroom hours without ever having to resort to the use of a spittoon. He smelled of whisky and cut plug, wore a stiff collar without a tie, and clothes that looked as if they had been slept in for a week.

"Howdy, Sam," he said, and put on a pair of steel-rimmed glasses to peer at the body of Jud Caldwell while he shook his head solemnly.

BART KEYES dismounted briskly and with importance, loosening the cinch on his horse. He was in his early thirties, a burly man with a well-kept red mustache and hawklike gray eyes. He glanced at Tony without speaking, nodded curtly to the sheriff, and began studying the scene as if it were understood that he was in general charge.

Tony drew Wade Magill to one side.

"Did you see Mary? he asked.

"Yes," Wade said, and his blue eyes crinkled with his grin. "She didn't go far away, Tony. She's at the jail with Betty and Mrs. Karnes, and I figure she'll be waiting for you."

"Much obliged," Tony said.

Then Judge Parker walked over to the sheriff, still shaking his head. He said, "Can't get over it, Sam—just can't get over it! Jud was a mighty big man. The whole county will miss him."

"He was too big to fit in this coffin," Bart Keyes announced. He straightened, and eyed Tony. "When did you come back?"

"Yesterday," Tony said.

"Knew Jud would have you arrested, didn't you? He says you stole a horse and saddle, and helped rustle Clawhammer stock."

Tony flushed darkly. "I wasn't so sure he'd want to press any charges," he said evenly. "He had a lot of more important things on his mind."

"Maybe," Keyes said, studying him. "But you were mighty sore at Jud."

"I reckon I was."

There was a silence, broken only by the dry sound of clods falling into the grave when one of the men from Hackberry stepped too close. Then Sam Karnes heard the distant murmur of a trail herd coming up out of the southwest. The Ranger turned on him with an expression of contempt.

"I suppose you haven't arrested anybody?"

"Not yet," Sam admitted. He slapped at a gnat stinging his neck, and controlled his temper. "I don't believe in going off half-cocked."

"Why, hell's fire, man!" Keyes exclaimed. "You ought to be charged with dereliction of duty! Who'd try to bury a man in a coffin that wouldn't hold him? Nobody but a drunk man. Who was drunk? Tom Henry. You had a warrant for Tom's arrest, and you didn't serve it. If you had, this wouldn't have happened. I'm going to lay that little piece of negligence before the grand jury, if the judge don't!"

"Go right ahead," Sam said. "You think a drunk man would go to all this trouble? No, sir—he'd shoot, and that's all."

"You been to Tom's place?"

"Yes. He wasn't there."

Keyes sneered. "Of course he wasn't. You gave him time to skip the country. He may be over the Rio Grande by now!" He turned, and picked up the spade from the grave. "Anybody know where this come from? Did Jud carry a spade in his wagon?"

"It's Aunt Callie's," Tony said, after a pause. "She used it around her rose bushes. The killer could have got it at the same time he got the coffin."

Judge Parker had been examining

the death wound.

"I figure this was done with a forty-four," he said. "Now, it wasn't close enough to leave any powder burns, and there ain't any way of telling whether it was fired from a pistol or a saddle-gun. They told me you took Tom's six-shooter away from him yesterday, Sam. Did you notice whether he had a Winchester on his saddle?"

"I never noticed," Sam said.

The judge bit off another chew of tobacco. "It would have been mighty dark under these trees, even with a full moon," he drawled speculatively. "And that's a dead center shot, if I ever saw one. You think a drunk man could have done it?"

"Damn it all, Judge, he was standing right over Jud all the time Jud was digging his grave!" Keyes broke in impatiently. "It ain't your job to solve this crime—that's my business. You just render a coroner's verdict."

JUDGE PARKER called his group to one side, and conferred briefly with them while he chewed. The sound of horses on the road west of the creek came to their ears, and Sam Karnes looked that way, to see another buggy swinging down to cross the draw. It was Troy Holcomb, and Joe Rankin was accompanying the bank official on horseback.

Their arrival interrupted proceedings. Holcomb stared at the group, and at the coffin.

"What's this — a funeral?" he called in an awed tone.

Then he came near enough to see whose body lay beside the grave, and the recognition made him recoil in horror. Joe Rankin, a short, bald man with pale eyebrows and a broad face that looked perpetually sunburned, came over with his hat off, wiping his brow with a blue bandanna.

He stared with protruding eyes, and then exclaimed, "Well, I'll be good and well damned! Who did that?"

He looked at Sam Karnes, and the sheriff remembered that all had not been friendship between the brush country ranchman and the Rangers.

"We don't know yet," the sheriff said.

Rankin looked around, saw Tony, and eyed him with a significance the sheriff could not [illegible]hom.

"Well," he said, "I reckon I deal with you now, Tony. I want to water my herd here, just like I told you last night."

Tony straightened, as if realizing for the first time that the responsibilities of the Clawhammer were now his.

"It's all right this time, Joe," he said. "But the deal we made last night—that's all off."

"What do you mean, this time?" Rankin demanded belligerently. "You going to be like your old man? The next herd I bring up out of the brush—"

"The next herd," Tony said slowly, "will have to go around to some other water. I'm going to finish that barbed wire."

Rankin glared, his pale eyebrows coming together. He pulled the hat back on his bald head, and walked stockily toward Tony.

"Why, you damned back-biter!" he flared. "You was anxious enough to throw in with me last night. You begged me to help you get Jud Caldwell! All right. It looks like you got him!"

"Shut your mouth, Joe!" Tony Caldwell said, and lashed out with a whip-like right-handed blow that sent Rankin staggering.

The short man tripped on his spurs, and sat down, legs spread wide. He looked at Sam Karnes, and saw no sympathy there, and in the extremity of his rage he turned to Bart Keyes.

"There's the man that killed Jud!" he yelled, pointing at Tony. "He threatened Jud last night. He said he was going to get him if it was the last thing he ever done!"

Keyes faced Tony. "Is that true?"

"None of your damned business!" Tony snapped.

"I'll make it my business!" the Ranger said. "You're under arrest, Tony. Hand over that gun!"

Sam Karnes moved forward, lifting his hand in protest. But both the sheriff and Bart Keyes were a little too slow. Tony Caldwell had the gun out of his holster, but he reached it toward the Ranger muzzle first, and the hammer was thumbed back.

"I've got things to do," he said, "and nobody's going to arrest me right now!"

He moved in so close the gun muzzle touched Keyes's belt-buckle. The Ranger paled, and left his arms go limp at his sides.

"Karnes!" he called. "Make this locoed kid behave!"

"You make him," Sam said drily. "This is a State case you opened, Bart!"

"Wade," Tony said, "I'm swapping horses with you. My saddle's there under the tree."

He lifted Bart Keyes's gun from its holster, and gave it a back-hand flip into the grave. He turned, toed the stirrup of Wade Magill's white-faced sorrel, rode swiftly down across the creek bed, and vanished in the mesquites.

"Hotheaded fool!" swore Keyes. "After I bring Tom Henry in, I'll ride his trail if I have to go all the way to Mexico City!"

Joe Rankin got up, brushed the dirt from his trousers, and wiped blood from his lips. Sam Karnes assumed a bland, disinterested look. Judge Parker cleared his throat, and chewed rapidly.

"Well," he announced solemnly, "the judgment of this here coroner's inquest is that Jud Caldwell come to his death as the result of a gunshot wound inflicted by a person or persons unknown, but said person must have been a blame good shot, drunk or sober."

VII

IT WAS late in the evening when the party got back to town, bearing Jud Caldwell's body, and the sheriff had begun to feel the weariness and strain of the last twenty-four hours.

He chuckled at Bart Keyes's discomfiture, in spite of his worry over Tony. Keyes had retrieved his pistol, glaring at Sam Karnes and reiterating his threat to bring a charge of dereliction of duty against him. He had ridden off to find Tom Henry.

Joe Rankin rode to Hackberry with the others. He would stay in town Sunday for the funeral, he said, and then on Monday would complete the arrangements he had been making with Troy Holcomb for a bank loan. Meanwhile, his herd could rest up at the Hackberry water holes, eating Clawhammer grass. Rankin was still bitter over Tony's change of heart.

"You going before the grand jury and tell 'em about Tony threatening to get Jud" the sheriff asked.

"Why not?" retorted Rankin. "He said it. He was sore enough to kill a man, if I ever seen anybody that mad!"

"Sure," Sam said. "But he didn't mean he'd get Jud that way. He was going to lick him in the cattle business. And this other thing is just something that you and me and a lot of old-timers haven't realized. Jud was the only one who did. Jud knew that ranching ain't like it used to be. It's turning into a *business*—a cutthroat, competitive business. If you realized that like Jud did, and you woke up tomorrow and found that you owned the Clawhammer, why, you'd fence the water holes, too."

"Damned if I would!" Rankin grunted. "I can't stand barbed wire!"

"Neither can I," admitted Sam. "But we'll see the time when it's everywhere."

He left the others at the hotel, and went to the jail. Stabling his horse,

he thought about Rankin, who had hated Jud Caldwell like poison, and still had come to town a day earlier than he needed to, to attend the funeral.

It would be that way with many others. Jud Caldwell held their respect, if not their affection. He had been more than the owner of the bigest ranch in the county. He *was* the Clawhammer.

And the sheriff wondered if Tony Caldwell, young and wild and on the dodge, would be able to hold the cattle empire together. He dreaded facing Mary.

She rose to her feet and stood slender and pale when he entered the living room, and Ivy hovered solicitously in the background. But it was Betty Caldwell who came to meet him at the door.

"Bart Keyes " she asked anxiously. "What did he do? Does he suspect anybody?"

Sam Karnes hung his hat on a nail. "Bart suspects everybody, I reckon," he said. "But he ain't done much of anything—not yet. If you're worrying about Tony, you don't need to. Not right now."

"He asked Wade a lot of questions," Betty said. "He wanted to know about the trouble Wade had with Dad, and where Wade was last night, and—"

She stopped, and colored. The sheriff was smiling at her.

"Wade's at the hotel," he said, "and Bart hasn't got around to him yet. And Tony's all right, Mary, except he's worried about you leaving like you did."

"I'll bet!" Mary said cynically. "If he had cared much, he wouldn't have gone last night. He had his choice."

"A man can't always choose the way he wants," Sam told her gently. "Anyway, he and Rankin have busted up before they got started. They had a little argument, and Tony knocked Joe down. Then"—and now he was guessing hopefully—"he left for Mexico to see about those cattle. From what he told me this morning there ain't much time."

Mary didn't answer. Betty left for the hotel, where Miss Callie was waiting, and the sheriff ate his supper and went to bed. . . .

IT SEEMED to him that his head had scarcely touched the pillow before somebody was rattling the front door and shouting his name. He went sleepily through the hall, and saw that pale daylight was just breaking over the mulberry trees in the park.

Bart Keyes was standing outside with Tom Henry. The Rafter H owner held unsteadily to the door jamb, and grinned.

"Howdy, you old buzzard!" he said thickly. "Fooled you. I was in the house when you come by, but I couldn't get up. When was it you come out there, Sam?"

Sam told him it was yesterday. Tom Henry whooped, and struck at the ground with his hat to show how inebriated he had been at the time. And Keyes pushed him unceremoniously through the doorway.

"Lock him up, Karnes!" he said. "He wasn't too drunk to take to the brush and hide. You could have arrested him yesterday if you'd busted in. The way it was, I had to trail him most of the night."

"Tough," the sheriff said heartily. "What's the charge? Threats against Jud's life?"

"You been asleep, as usual, haven't you? The grand jury met last night, and voted to indict him for the killing. They also had a few things to say about the way you run this office. I'll lay you a little bet there's a new sheriff by next week!"

"You can go to hell, Bart," Sam said, and closed the door.

He plied Tom Henry with black coffee, and the Rafter H owner sat on the edge of a cot and looked through the barred window at sunrise over the town square.

"Just let me sleep, Sam!" he pleaded. "Just for awhile. So many people kept coming around, botherin' me!"

"Who?" demanded the sheriff.

"I don't remember. You, and somebody else, and . . . I'm sleepy. I always get sleepy when I drink. Going out from town, I had to turn off the road and lie down for a little nap. And then"—he sat up straight for a few seconds—"and then somebody took a shot at me, Sam!"

"After you took the nap?" the sheriff pursued.

Tom dropped his head into his hands, and rubbed his bloodshot eyes.

"I—I don't know," he said. "It was dark. Somebody shot at me, and I wasn't in any shape to draw a bead on the son-of-a-gun. I couldn't even dodge!"

"Did you see who it was?"

Tom Henry shook his head. "Just let me sleep, Sam—just let me alone for a little while."

He rolled over with his face to the wall and his legs still hanging from the edge of the cot, and began snoring. Sam Karnes got up heavily and went back to the kitchen, where he puttered with the coffee pot, hoping that Ivy would hear him and would get breakfast. It looked like a busy day.

He wanted to go back to the water hole, and to Miss Callie's cottage. Tom Henry's half-remembered story tied in with what the sheriff had suspected—somebody had frightened away the killer before he could finish burying Jud Caldwell, and that somebody might well have been Tom.

"Let's see, now," Sam muttered. "Tom turned off the road and took a nap. When he woke up, it was dark, and he was still drunker'n a hoot-owl, with a couple of bottles on him to fall back on. He got back on his horse and rode by the water hole, and he rode right up on Jud's killer without knowing it. The killer took a shot at Tom, and then lit out in a hurry, not knowing Tom was drunk. Tom rode away fast, because he wasn't in shape to fight, like he said. Now, if he can just remember!"

That reconstruction made sense, but who were the "people" who had come around the Rafter H the next day, bothering Tom until he left the house? Who had been there besides Sam Karnes?

THE sheriff noisily shook the grate of the wood stove, and Ivy appeared at last. While she was getting breakfast, he stepped out the front door and looked around until he found the unsmoked cigarette Jud Caldwell had hurled against the wall two days before. There could be, the sheriff thought, a great deal of individuality in the rolling of a cigarette. . . .

It was the biggest funeral ever held in Hackberry. The district judge who would preside at Tom Henry's trial, in May, was there, silver-maned and pompous in a swallowfork coat. He had brought the district attorney with him.

These guardians of justice over the four sprawling counties stood between Judge Parker and Few Smith, the Hackberry county attorney, who had come by his appellation of sparseness through losing a leg and several fingers in the Confederate cause. The three remaining county commissioners—Jud Caldwell had been the senior member of that board—ranged themselves under the mulberry trees with Troy Holcomb, Fritz-the-Dutchman, and other business men.

Bart Keyes stayed close to the district attorney.

In a group a little apart were a dozen ranchmen. The sheriff studied them, and saw Joe Rankin and a tall, stoop-shouldered man named Carson Tate whispering to each other. There could be some significance in that, he decided. Tate owned the T4 Connected, north of the Clawhammer, and Jud Caldwell's refusal to let trail herds come through his range had caused Tate incovenience when he had bought Mexican cattle.

But the ranchers, like everybody else, stood bare-headed and solemn as the Reverend Cal Tyree climbed to the bed of the wagon that had been driven into the park, and towered over Jud's coffin.

He was a Methodist circuit rider, a bald-headed, rail-thin man with huge red hands and an odd squint that made him carry his head on one side. He was given to sonorous oratory, and now he eulogized the departed until dry little Judge Parker stopped chewing for once, and turned to Sam Karnes.

"Hey," he whispered hoarsely behind his hand, "You sure that's Jud Caldwell in that coffin?"

Sam Karnes didn't answer. Much of what the preacher was saying was true. You had to take Jud's mean, picayunish traits along with his bold and forceful qualities, and the occasional bursts of generosity he displayed.

Jud had given this park to the town. He had built a church for Cal Tyree, a structure too small for this occasion, but a church, nevertheless. He had not been a stingy man, despite his treatment of his son, Tony.

The sheriff squirmed in his unaccustomed broadcloth coat, and pondered all these things while Cal Tyree went on and on in tribute to the cow country Caesar he had come both to bury and to praise.

Perhaps the explanation lay in Jud's blind possessiveness—in the highly developed property sense that had made him the first to fence his land. He had considered that he owned this town. It had pleased him to do things for it, so long as the town paid him homage. He had expected that same sort of unasking fealty from Tony.

But he had not reckoned with Tony's own proud, independent spirit, and today there was one thing missing. Betty sat with Miss Callie and Mary, her eyes downcast, Wade Magill at her side. The boy who had to take Jud Caldwell's place was absent, and with him the show of solidarity that Joe Rankin and Carson Tate and the other ranchers might need to see.

"Jud Caldwell," Tyree declared solemnly, "was a strong man. He carved an empire from the wilderness of rimrock and mesquite, and pioneered more than one trail for others to follow. He had the courage to fight for things he believed right, to fight for forms of progress as yet unpopular with his fellowmen."

The heat of the sun was upon him, and he paused to wipe his bald head with a bandanna, and to drink from a tin dipper. He put his head farther on the side, and waved a large red hand toward the group of cattlemen.

"Jud Caldwell has been struck down by someone who bears the curse of Cain. As a man, I count that a personal loss; as a minister of the Gospel, I know that vengeance belongs to God. But as both, I plead most earnestly with you who knew Jud Caldwell to go your ways in peace. Let not his passing be the signal for new strife, nor for the revival of old. Say, rather, as the children of Israel said to Edom, 'We will go by the high way; and if I and my cattle drink of thy water, then I will pay for it.' "

The sheriff blinked and listened, surprised to hear that water hole disputes went back that far. He saw Joe Rankin standing stockily, boots wide apart, eyes malevolent beneath his pale brows. If there ever had been any religion in the rancher's makeup, twenty years of chousing ladino cattle through the thorny brush had worn it thin.

VIII

OLD SAM KARNES was neither irreligious, nor lacking in respect for the dead, but he tiptoed quietly out of the park during the closing prayer, and went back to the jail to saddle his horse. For one thing, he had no desire to hear whatever criticism the grand

jury reportedly had in store for him, and for another, it disgusted him to see the way Bart Keyes tried to curry favor with the visiting officials.

He reached the Hackberry water holes at about four o'clock. Joe Rankin's crew was holding the trail herd loosely on the west side of the creek, and enjoying a restful Sunday in camp.

The sheriff studied the shallow grave, noticing for the first time that it was in a direct line between the two biggest live-oaks in the motte, and equally distant from each. Then he shrugged that off as a coincidence. Nobody who appreciated the tangled toughness of live-oak roots would have tried to dig close to any tree.

He went slowly down into the creek bed, studying the tracks Jud Caldwell had made here, going and coming. His own boot tracks of yesterday morning were beside Jud's, and the two days of sun and the shrinkage of the pool due to the watering of Rankin's cattle had contributed to the hardening of the mud into a record that would last until the next rain.

Sam followed the trail to the fallen live-oak, and sat on the log for awhile, looking at the spot where the footprints bunched. He picked up Jud's cigarette stubs, and wrapped them carefully in a bandanna, stowing them in his jumper pocket.

Then, retracing his steps to the east banks, he stopped abruptly and wondered what Jud Caldwell had weighed. His own tracks in the mud were considerably deeper than those of the Clawhammer owner.

Funny, the sheriff mused. He was a mighty solid man, and he ought to have come close to a hundred and ninety-five pounds. Besides, the way he always walked. But I reckon when he made these tracks, he was pussyfooting across here in the hope of surprising somebody cutting his wire.

Miss Callie's coffin was still at the graveside. The sheriff stooped and lifted it, just to see whether one man could carry it or not. Then he climbed back on his horse and went up to her cottage.

The way things had happened, this was the first time he had been here in daylight. The wagon tracks came right up to the yard gate, as he had expected they would. But there was a hard gravel walk to the little gallery, and no footprints showed.

He stood off and sized up the house from the viewpoint of a man who planned to remove a coffin from the parlor. He decided he would have ordered Jud to slide it out through the parlor window.

This opened on the gallery, behind a tangle of morning glory vines. A couple of hide-bottomed chairs stood outside the window, and there was a man's buckskin gauntlet lying carelessly between them. Sam Karnes stooped and picked this up.

He turned it over in his hand, and whistled softly. The glove had a wide, flaring cuff, designed to protect the wrist of a man using a rope when working cattle. It was one of those fancier items often sported by cowboys, along with ornate hatbands and silver mounted "Gal-leg" spurs. And embroidered on the cuff in turkey-red thread were the initials "W M."

Wade Magill had said Jud could have a fight if he wanted one. He could have cut the Clawhammer wire, and he had at least been handy to the waterhole on the night of the killing. But the sheriff kept his mind free from dark suspicions, and hoped Wade would be able to explain how the gauntlet had come to be on Miss Callie's gallery.

Sam wanted solitude, and a chance to think things out, so he killed time by getting the ranch wagon and driving down to the motte to bring Miss Callie's coffin back to her parlor. One profit accrued from this charitable deed. He was able to compare the wagon tracks with those already in front of the spinster's gate. The tire of the off front wheel had a brad miss-

ing, and the mark it left proved conclusively that Jud's wagon had been used to haul away the coffin.

SAM KARNES got back to town after dark, and Joe Rankin hailed him from the hotel gallery. The brush-country rancher was sitting with Carson Tate, his face heavy and truculent in the shadows.

"You see Tony?" he demanded.

The sheriff said he hadn't, and Rankin and Tate exchanged glances. Tate shrugged his stooped shoulders.

"We ain't spying for Bart Keyes, Sam," he said. "But if you see Tony, tell him we want to talk to him—before he does anything rash."

"Such as what?" Sam parried.

"Such as trying to bring any cattle out of Mexico—if he can find any in the first place!" Rankin said. He made an impatient gesture. "I'll put our cards on the table, Sam. Jud Caldwell was in a lot worse shape than anybody knew. If you don't believe me, ask the mercantile store how much he owed 'em for wire. It's like I always said about owning land in the cattle business—you can get land-poor plumb quick, in a bad year."

"If you got land, you got credit," Sam objected. "I don't see what you're driving at."

"Just this. Maybe Jud could have pulled through, but a kid can't. Everybody's against him. Now, Carson and I are willing to buy him out, if he's reasonable. It would give us both water, and a short route for Mexican cattle like we used to have, before Jud fenced. We'd divide the range. And"—his voice rose and hardened—"if Tony ain't smart enough to get out from under, we'll make him wish he had! He'd have to bring Mexican cattle through both our places, or go the devil of a way around!"

The sheriff pulled out his tobacco sack and rolled a smoke. Remembering that Joe Rankin was here to see Troy Holcomb about a loan, he was wondering if this plan were as new as Rankin tried to make it sound.

"Trespass laws say you've got to have a fence," he said mildly. "Otherwise, you can't stop a man from going through your range. You can't post unfenced property."

Rankin laughed mirthlessly. "You just tell him what I said," he retorted.

"The hell I will!" said Sam Karnes. "I'm keeping my nose out of Tony's business. But I can tell both of you one thing. He's a lot more like Jud Caldwell than you ever suspected. And maybe he'll surprise you."

Rankin made a jeering reply, but the sheriff didn't wait to hear it. He rode on around the shadowy park, and turned in at the corral behind the jail, feeling the weight of another problem on his shoulders.

In spite of what he had just told Rankin and Tate, Tony Caldwell's business *was* his own, so long as Mary's happiness was involved. Somehow, he had to devise means of helping the Clawhammer. Especially, he had to see that his hot-headed son-in-law was neither hurt nor baited into further trouble with the law.

He got down, and unsaddled wearily. In all his easy-going years, things had never piled up so formidably as they had piled up now. There was a killing to solve, and Tom Henry's life depending on the correct solution. Jud Caldwell's old enemies were conspiring to smash the Clawhammer in its moment of crisis, and Bart Keyes was doing his utmost to ruin the sheriff officially.

Jud Caldwell, he thought, could have kept those last two things in hand. Jud's death seemed to have loosed the forces of evil in Hackberry County, bringing out the worst in men.

He pitched the horse a chip of hay, and stopped in the corral to look at the stars. There were no clouds anywhere, and no prospect of rain to break the drought. He heard Ivy rattling dishes in the kitchen, and the savory smell of frying meat drifted

out to him, stirring a sudden hunger.

And then a single shot exploded against the quiet of the evening, making a strangely hollow and muffled sound, as if it had been fired in a cistern.

The sheriff whirled, trying to locate the noise of the gun. Ivy dropped a plate, and ran toward the front of the jail, and Sam Karnes knew then that something had happened inside. He hurried through the living quarters from the kitchen, and Mary's frightened scream guided him to the cells at the right front of the building.

IVY was standing transfixed in the first of these, an oil lamp in her shaking hand, and horror twisting the accustomed serenity of her face. Mary was kneeling on the floor beside the body of Tom Henry.

"He—he's dead!" she exclaimed, looking up with wild eyes. "He's been killed!"

"Get out of here, honey—both of you get out of here!" Sam Karnes said.

He took the lamp from Ivy's hand, and set it on the table by Tom Henry's cot. The light glittered on the blue steel barrel of a six-shooter lying on the floor, only a few inches from the Rafter H owner's hand.

Tom lay sprawled grotesquely, as if he had been trying to turn away from the window when he fell. And when the sheriff turned his body over, he saw that the pistol flame had scorched Tom's blue work shirt, directly over the heart.

Ivy was still looking white-faced through the cell door. The sheriff pushed her gently aside, went out the front door, and looked up and down the street in the moonlight. There was nobody in sight. But the mulberry trees made a splotch of midnight shadow in the middle of the square. Anybody could have reached the park in a matter of seconds, and emerged from it later on any of its three sides. The shot would not have been heard far away.

He came back into Tom Henry's cell, and picked up the gun. It was a .44 Colt's revolver with a white bone handle. Half the men in Southwest Texas carried guns like it.

"Sam," Ivy said, "did anyone search Tom when he was brought in here? Do you think he sobered up enough to—to—"

"To shoot himself?" Sam shook his head. "No. He sobered up enough, maybe, to remember what he saw out at the water hole when Jud was killed. That's what Jud's killer was afraid of, anyway. He called Tom to the window, and reached in and shot him. Maybe he dropped the gun accidental. Maybe he wanted to make it look like suicide. Anyway, I figure this is the gun that killed Jud Caldwell!"

He put the pistol on the table, and straightened with a sigh, shaking his head sadly as he looked down at the dead man. Things had been rockier than Tom Henry had known.

IX

JUDGE PARKER would have to be called in to officiate as coroner, so the sheriff pulled on his hat and went out on the town. He shambled along the wooden sidewalks in a seemingly aimless manner, glad of the night wind on his cheeks, his mind restless and confused.

He thought, Tom would still be alive if Bart Keyes hadn't brought him in to jail, and then, trying to be fair even with Keyes, he doubted that. Somebody had been prowling around the Rafter H on the day after Jud's death. Chances were it had been the killer, worrying about how much Tom had seen, looking for a chance to shoot Tom even then.

Locusts fiddled in the mulberry trees, and the little town lay quiet, dark for the most part, and seemingly far removed from violence of any kind.

An industrious hammering came

from the boot shop as the sheriff passed. He looked in the window and saw Fritz-the-Dutchman at work on a boot sole, his mouth filled with tacks and the light of the two oil lamps gleaming on his bald head. Fritz was a lonely man who had lived here twenty years and never quite adjusted himself. He worked on most Sundays as he worked on any other day.

The sheriff went on. He saw only a Mexican at the counter of the Lone Star Chili Parlor. He passed the dark, two-storied frame courthouse, where a sagging window shutter creaked and banged in the wind. A young couple sparking on the shadowy front steps drew apart guiltily, and the sheriff turned quickly away.

The chairs on the hotel gallery were deserted. Sam Karnes stopped there to make a cigarette, wondering whether Rankin and Tate had gone peacefully to bed, or were up in a room with a bottle, making their plans to ruin Tony Caldwell.

He turned down the square on that side, and as he reached the High Lonesome Saloon, a bare-headed man

came hurrying out of the alley, breathing hard. It was Wade Magill.

The sheriff threw away his cigarette. Wade halted abruptly. Lamplight streaming over the tops of the swinging doors touched his sandy hair, and showed the odd little sun crinkles around his eyes.

"Fire somewheres, Wade?" the sheriff asked softly.

"I been over to the livery stable," Wade said. "Miss Callie ain't to be found anywhere, Sam. She just up and disappeared. Her horse is gone, too. Betty's worried about her."

"Why?" Sam asked. "She probably went back to the ranch."

He pushed open one of the swinging doors, and let his eyes adjust themselves to the light. Four of the stockmen who had come to town for Jud's funeral stood at the bar with Troy Holcomb, talking drought and cattle prices and hard times, lapsing occasionally into little stunned silences. Few Smith and old Judge Parker were playing dominoes at a table in the back.

The sheriff entered, and Wade came behind him.

"Why would she want to go back to the ranch?" he pursued. "There ain't anybody out there, and a scary old maid like her wouldn't do that."

"Never mind Miss Callie!" the sheriff snapped with a show of irritation. "I got more important things to 'tend to. Listen to what I tell the judge."

Troy Holcomb joined them, straightening his tie with a glance in the bar mirror, looking neat and cool. Wade listened, his face growing pale and intent, his breathing still labored.

Judge Parker slowly pushed back his chair, chewing a little faster on the tobacco that bulged his cavernous cheek. When Sam had finished, he ran a finger around the inside of his tieless collar, as if it choked him.

Few Smith, pot-bellied and pasty of face from lack of exercise, lifted his glass of liquor, and set it down untasted. He reached his good hand for his crutch.

"Goshamighty, Sam!" he exclaimed. "Now we *will* have the district attorney camping here, telling us what to do before the case ever comes to trial!"

"Got to find somebody to try, first," Sam reminded him.

JUDGE PARKER filled his glass, and drank the whisky with the tobacco still in his mouth. He wiped his lips thoughtfully on the back of

his hand.

"We'll have a covey of Rangers, too, if they get the idea that we can't keep law and order in Hackberry County," he predicted. "First Jud, and now Tom Henry. Same, you'd better organize a posse. Tom's killer couldn't be so far out of town."

Wade Magill and Troy Holcomb said, "I'll go," almost in unison, and the sheriff glanced from one to the other, and made a weary gesture.

"He probably ain't left town at all," he said. "Why should he? If he was smart—and I think he's plenty smart—he'd have stayed right here."

"Miss Callie left," Wade said quietly.

Sam Karnes shot him a sharp glance, but there was no guile in Magill's blue eyes, and the sheriff decided he was merely trying to be helpful. But this was the second time he had dropped a hint as to the spinster's guilt, and now Sam pulled the initialed glove from his pocket.

"Speaking of Miss Callie, Wade," he drawled, "maybe you can tell me how come this was on her front gallery."

Wade flushed, and his eyes crinkled and narrowed. "Well, no—I can't," he said.

"You mean you don't know?"

"I can't tell you," Wade said hesitatingly.

"Well, we'll talk about it later," the sheriff said, and pocketed the gauntlet again. "No—a posse ain't the answer. It'll take some smart detective work. Now, just ask yourself four questions—why, how, when and who. If you can answer the first three, you can usually answer the who."

"Seems to me the first three are plain enough, in Tom's case," Holcomb observed. "Either Jud's killer wanted to get rid of him, or he committed suicide. You remember how he talked here in the saloon that day."

Sam Karnes shook his head. "I still say Jud's killing wasn't the work of a drunk man."

"Well, you'd better get busy mighty fast, Sam!" Judge Parker said drily. He pushed back his chair and got up, looking at the sheriff over the top rims of his glasses. "Bart Keyes has been working on the grand jury. Few and me stayed out of it, but last night they raked you over the coals for the way you run the sheriff's office. And when they hear about Tom being killed right in the jail, where a man ought to be safe if he's safe anywhere, no telling what they will say."

"All right, then, build me a two-story jail with some inside cells!" Sam Karnes broke in angrily. "And right now, come on over and hold an inquest!"

All of them went to the jail.

It was Few Smith's expressed opinion, as he hobbled outside an hour later, that Tom Henry had committed suicide in the remorseful realization of the fact that he had killed Jud Caldwell while drunk. Troy Holcomb and Wade Magill leaned toward this theory.

But Judge Parker was doubtful, and Sam Karnes knew that Few was indulging in a little wishful thought. He dreaded having the district attorney around. He would have preferred that the case be closed.

The sheriff stood at the door and watched them cross the street and disappear into the park, then he stepped outside for another look at the weather signs before going to bed. The sky was clear, and the moon was still nearly full.

The wind came out of the east, bringing the sound of singing from Cal Tyree's little church, down the street from the courthouse. This was the closing hymn, and tomorrow Cal would have another funeral service to preach.

Sam sighed, and started to go back in. Then a rider rounded a corner of the park with his horse in a fast trot, and pulled up in front of the jail to jump down there. It was Tony Caldwell.

That was Wade Magill's apron-

faced sorrel Tony was riding. The sheriff saw him pull the reins over the horse's head, and drop them to the ground, and he thought sharply, You couldn't have picked a worse time to come back! If Bart Keyes hears you were anywhere near town when Tom was killed you're in for it!

HE TRIED to put that worry out of a mind already overcrowded with worries, and called, "Howdy, son! Didn't expect you back so soon."

Tony strode up the walk in that proud, reckless way. The brim of his hat shadowed his eyes, but his teeth gleamed in a smile.

"Mary home?" he asked eagerly. "She still mad at me?"

"You'll have to ask her that. Come inside before somebody sees you."

"I'm not hiding from Keyes, or anybody else!" Tony said. "I just got work to do." He stepped into the hallway, and called, "Mary! Mary, honey!"

The sheriff heard a rush of flying feet, and guessed that the quarrel had been forgotten. He gave them a minute, then went inside, and the shine in Mary's eyes was worth the risk Tony had taken.

They went on into the living room, and Tony heard about Tom Henry. He looked down at his boots for a minute, and the sheriff saw his knuckles whiten as he held Mary's hand and sat close beside her on the couch.

Then he raised his head and said, "I was sorry I couldn't get here in time for the funeral. But I'm not sorry any longer. If Dad had let Tom Henry alone—"

"I ain't so sure about that," Sam said. "Tom had a streak of bad luck. It happened he surprised the killer at the motte, the way I've got it figured out." And he told Tony about Tom's complaint that people had come around his house the next day, looking for him.

"Joe Rankin!" Tony exclaimed. "Yes, and there's a good chance Joe was up there on the night of the killing. Maybe he's your man. Joe told Rocky Morse that he was going to cut that wire and take his cattle through the Clawhammer, come hell or high water. Well, the wire was cut. You ought to arrest Joe Rankin for the killing!"

Sam Karnes rubbed his jaw. Tony was like Jud Caldwell in this, too. He wanted somebody arrested. The sheriff preferred to reason things out. He wanted to be sure of his suspect's guilt before taking so drastic a step.

"Well," he said, "that ain't anything but hearsay, son. But I'll have a talk with Joe. You didn't go down to Mexico this time, did you?"

"I just went to the roundup camp," Tony said, and now the press of Clawhammer responsibilities crowded other thoughts out of his mind, and he got up to pace the floor. He said, "I figure we might find between a thousand and fifteen hundred Clawhammer steers down there in the brush—no more. I sent Rocky across the river with a note to Don Enrique, asking him to round up three thousand head for me, pronto. Then I hightailed back here to see if you could handle a couple of things at this end."

"What?" Sam asked.

"I wish you'd go to the banks tomorrow—both banks—and see how much money Dad had on deposit. I'll probably have to pay Don Enrique nine dollars a head, delivered at the river. That'll be twenty-seven thousand dollars. The Kansas market price is going to go up, cattle being scarce as they are, and I ought to be able to count on fifteen or sixteen dollars a head there. If I can get 'em there in time, that is."

He stopped in the middle of the room, and grinned at Ivy in a way that made her beam. He looked at Mary, switching back easily to a possessiveness that had nothing to do with land or cattle. Mary smiled at him.

This was the new Tony—the man of business, his wildness submerged by the satisfying excitement of getting Clawhammer trail herds headed north. But neither Mary nor Tony knew of the threats Rankin and Tate had made. And Sam Karnes remembered that Bart Keyes was somewhere down in the brush, determined to bring Tony Caldwell to jail on one charge or another.

"Now," Tony went on suddenly, "in case there ain't twenty-seven thousand on deposit after the way Dad bought wire, tell Troy Holcomb I'll sign a note to cover the difference. I'll send Rocky up in a couple of days to bring the money down. It'll take Don Enrique a little time to gather the cattle. And meanwhile we'll be getting all the Clawhammer stock out of the brush."

"I'll go to the banks," Sam said. "What else?"

"See if you can hire me about a dozen more hands, riders who'll be willing to go up the Trail."

THE sheriff diplomatically suggested that the womenfolk ought to make some coffee, and fix Tony a little snack. When they had gone to the kitchen, he motioned the younger man to sit down.

"Two things, son," he began. "I know you ain't afraid of Keyes, but this time it ain't a matter of being brave, but smart. If you want to put over this cattle deal, you'd better keep low. I know the way his mind works. He could ruin everything for you by throwing you in jail for a couple of weeks, right now, either on the old warrant, or on suspicion of killing."

Tony's jaw tightened. "All right," he said. "I'll stay in the brush. That's why I sent Rocky into Mexico. I figured Keyes would be watching for me at the river. But while I'm here, Sam, I'm going to return Wade's horse and get mine, and I don't care who sees me. What else?"

"Rankin and Tate. They won't take kindly to a Clawhammer crew driving cattle up through their range. You might save time by going around."

"Going around?" Tony echoed angrily. "I'll be darned if I will! That's where Joe Rankin made a mistake by not owning more'n four sections of land. He can claim the rest of it, but it's still free range, and I'll cross it! And the Tate land's not fenced. They're both welcome to cut my herds to see that there ain't any Triangle R or T Four Connected cattle in 'em. But if they try holding me up in any way, they'll have to fight!"

X

YOUNG CALDWELL left Hackberry before daylight, riding his own horse, and Sam Karnes saw the recklessness that always sat with him in the saddle. One way on another, there was trouble ahead. Jud Caldwell's feud lived on, and Tate and Rankin were not likely to forget.

The sheriff sighed. He could see their side of things. A man hated to drive cattle the long way around, over a dry trail, if there was a direct route and a water hole available.

But things were changing, and barbed wire and windmills were a part of the changes. Sam Karnes went to bed, troubled, and slept late when he finally closed his eyes.

He was at the door of the Stockman's Bank when it opened for the day's business, and inquiring through one of the wickets as to the status of the Caldwell account. The clerk went back to examine a ledger, and returned with a strange expression on his face.

"Mr. Caldwell," he said, "drew out his entire account the other afternoon—the day before he was found dead."

Sam stared. "What?"

"Yes, sir. He had nearly forty thousand dollars on deposit, but he wrote a check for the whole amount. He was—well, a little bit peeved at the bank, because he demanded that we

foreclose on Wade Magill, and Mr. Holcomb refused to do that."

"Troy!" the sheriff called. "Come here and tell me about this!"

Troy Holcomb left his desk. As usual, he was neatly dressed, wearing a coat and a white collar, and looking cool despite the day's advancing heat. But there was worry in his eyes.

"That's all I know about it, Sam," he protested. "In the first place, it wasn't unusual. Jud was always having a fit of temper, and shuttling his account from here to the First National, and back again. You know how he was."

"Sure," Sam said, and studied Holcomb. "But why didn't you tell me this out by the water hole, or when I talked to you last night?"

The bank official squirmed. "Look, Sam," he said in a lower tone. "The fact is, a withdrawal that big left us in a tight place. I mean if we caught a Federal bank examiner before we can get some more cash, it would raise trouble with us. We've sent a man over to the First National to get some cash, just in case one comes today."

"Tell me what happened," the sheriff said.

"Well, Jud had that fist fight with Tony, right at the door of the bank. That didn't improve his temper any, and he came on in here bellering like a beefed steer, wanting us to foreclose on Wade. I tried to explain to him that we're interested in backing Wade's well-drilling, but he wouldn't listen. He said he'd see us in hell before he'd do business with this bank, and wrote out a check for his money. That's all."

"Anybody see him take the money?"

"A few, maybe. But we had him drive around to the side door, because we had to give him about ten thousand dollars in silver, and that weighed nearly six hundred pounds. There was still time for him to get over to the First National and deposit it there."

"Did he?"

Holcomb looked startled. "Why, I guess he did. But I had to leave right then. I had to ride out to meet Joe Rankin's outfit coming up with the cattle."

Sam Karnes strode across the town square, and checked with the First National. He came out of that bank a few minutes later, his head whirling with the significance of this new discovery.

Jud Caldwell had been peeved at the First National, too, over something that had happened several months before. He had made no deposit there. That meant that Jud had had nearly forty thousand dollars in his wagon when he had started for the Clawhammer!

THE sheriff returned to his chair in the shade of the jail, and sank perspiring into it, thinking hard. There was the chance, he told himself, that robbery was the real motive for the killing. But would a robber have gone to all the elaborate details of the coffin and the grave? No, it still looked like a killing that stemmed from hatred and a desire for revenge. The killer had found the money later, and had counted himself that much to the good.

"Six hundred pounds of silver!" Sam muttered. "One thing's certain, one thing that Magill don't know. Miss Callie would have had a pretty hard time handling money that heavy!"

After a time he got up heavily, and set about trying to clear up other angles of the case. He went to the Hackberry Mercantile and ascertained that Joe Rankin was right. Jud owed the store nearly fifteen thousand dollars for barbed wire.

He had paid none of the bill when he had withdrawn his money.

"But we ain't worried about that," the store manager said. "We still got a carload of wire to deliver to the Clawhammer, and you know how it is

with the wholesale houses. When rock times hit the cattle business, we have to carry the ranchers, and the wholesalers have to carry us. And one of the first things the wholesale drummers always ask me is whether or not we've still got the Clawhammer on our books. A man owns his land, why he's good for credit."

Sam Karnes went back into the sunlight. Why, how, when and who, he thought, and nothing made sense. He had a feeling that he was getting nowhere. He strode past the courthouse, and crossed over to the boot shop. Fritz-the-Dutchman was hammering away at a last held between his knees, and Sam sauntered into the shop.

"Howdy, Fritz," he said.

"Py golly, you got plenty to do, eh?" Fritz said over a mouthful of brass tacks. "First Jud Caldwell, and then Tom Henry. Py golly, it's a schame, a schame!"

"It's worse than that," Sam said, and picked up one of the finished boots to admire Fritz's stitch-pattern. He said, "What was Jud raising such a ruckus about when he was in here the other day? I could hear him all the way down the block!"

Fritz spat the tacks into the palm of his callused hand, and the memory of his argument with Jud sent a flush all the way up on his bald head.

"He was a fool!" he declared. "I haf tried to tell him that his boots should be vun half-size larger. He vould not lissen. Und then he comes in mine shop, yelling because the boots are too tight. *Ach*, such a *dumkopf*—like a mule!"

"He didn't say anything here—I mean anything that might be a clue to what happened later?"

The bootmaker peered through his glasses. "Py golly, no!" he said positively. "I told him to get out of mine schop, und bring another bootmaker to Hackberry if he vants to! I told him to go soak his feet!"

"Soak his feet?" echoed Sam.

"Py golly, yes! I told him to valk in the creek mit the boots on, und let them dry on his feet. That vay, they stretch."

The sheriff scratched his jaw thoughtfully.

"He walked in the creek, all right, Fritz,," he said. "He went across the muddy edge of the water hole, just before somebody killed him. But surely he wasn't stopping out there just to do that—not with forty thousand dollars in his wagon!"

None of Sam Karnes's observations led anywhere that day, and he found new worries. The banks were not inclined to lend young Tony Caldwell the twenty-seven thousand dollars he wanted to use in buying Mexican cattle. It wasn't that the Clawhammer credit wasn't good, they explained; it was because the hand of every other ranchman was against Tony, and the shadow of the law was hanging over him.

IT BECAME plain to the sheriff that a large number of the citizens of Hackberry considered Tony guilty, and Karnes began to feel the pressure. The real killer had to be found, and quickly.

Next morning, the sheriff took the bone-handled gun that had killed Tom Henry to the Hackberry Mercantile Store, and left it there on the chance that its ownership could be checked through its serial number.

Leaving the place, he encountered Judge Parker.

"Looking for you, Sam," the judge said, shifting his tobacco in his cavernous cheek. "Betty Caldwell wants to go back to the Clawhammer. I figured I'd drive her out in my buggy, and I figured you ought to go along."

"I don't mind going along," Sam said. "But why?"

"Talk to Miss Callie—if she's there," the judge said. "More I got to thinking about Tom Henry's shooting, more I wondered how she come up and drifted about that time. Oh, you don't

need to look that way, Sam! I tell you a woman is capable of anything, if she's riled. It says something in a book about the hot place not being able to hold a candle to the fury of a woman that's been given the go-by. Well, Jud Caldwell did that, years ago. I know."

"I don't believe she killed Jud, or Tom either," the sheriff said.

Judge Parker spat out his tobacco, and dug into his wrinkled clothes for more. "Sam," he said, "you'd better do something, pronto! The grand jury's meeting tonight to consider an indictment against Tony—for both killings!"

Sam Karnes paced the judge's buggy on his horse. When they passed Tom Henry's range, he saw that the Rankin herd was still there, as if Joe Rankin took delight in having his cattle water at the very place that had been forbidden to them.

He opened the gate near the motte, and the buggy rolled through, and they could hear the distant *thum-thump* of the well-drilling on Wade Magill's land.

Privately, the sheriff thought he knew why Betty had wanted to come back to the ranch.

They turned on up the slope and neared Miss Callie's house. Judge Parker pulled rein suddenly as they approached her gate, and shouted a warning to Sam.

"Look out!" he yelled. "She's got a gun! She's going to shoot!"

XI

EVEN before Sam saw Miss Callie, who was half-hidden by a rose bush at the side of her house, the rifle cracked. But the gun was pointed upward, and a large hawk came plummeting down to crash against the paling fence.

"There!" Miss Callie exclaimed triumphantly, throwing the shell out of the rifle. "He's been after my chickens, just when I got some coming on to the frying size!"

Judge Parker produced a bandanna, and wiped sweat from the inside of his tieless collar. "You see that, Sam?" he said. "That was crack shooting, if I ever seen any!"

Betty climbed down from the buggy, and Miss Callie gave her a hug. Sam dismounted, taking off his hat awkwardly.

"You kind of had us worried, Miss Callie," he observed. "We didn't know what happened to you, running off like you did. That same night there was other trouble, too."

"I came home to water my rose bushes," she said tartly. "Anything wrong in that?"

"Well, no. But a lot of things have happened."

He told her about Tom Henry's death. She heard that with no great outward show of emotion, but when he mentioned Tony's visit and hinted at his financial diffffficulties, the spinster looked agitated.

"I can help him," she announced. "I can lend Tony a few thousand dollars, if it will help!"

Judge Parker threw a significant glance toward Sam, but the sheriff shook his head. Betty went up on the porch, and sat down there on one of the two hide-bottomed chairs. Sam Karnes remembered something, then.

He shambled up the porch steps, and leaned against one of the pillars, where the morning glory vines climbed, watching the girl's coppery hair change color as it caught sunshine and leaf shadow.

"I want to ask you something, Betty," he said in a kindly tone. "About this. I found it here, right by that chair, the day of the funeral."

Betty looked at Wade Magill's gauntlet, and flushed, and glanced out over the shimmering mesquite flat toward Wade's place. She knew who had dropped it there.

"Wade refused to explain," Sam went on. "I thought maybe you'd know something."

"I'll explain!" the girl said defiantly. "Wade dropped it here that evening when I met him, when I was supposed to be out horseback riding. Aunt Callie knew where I was."

"You didn't have to tell him!" Miss Callie put in shrilly. "You don't have to tell him anything!"

Betty's chin came up proudly. "But there's nothing to hide," she said calmly. "I want to tell him. There's no reason why Wade and I shouldn't get married now—a decent time after the funeral, that is. We're in love, Sam. We've been in love a long time. But we knew that Dad would raise the roof if he found out, so I had to meet Wade secretly."

Sam Karnes smiled, and drew a deep breath. It always pleased him to find out the good things, to bolster his faith in the innate virtues of human beings. What she had told him was logical enough, and he had suspected as much.

But there was a faintly disturbing thought to be put out of the back of his mind. Betty Caldwell would lie to protect Wade, to cover up for him. And Miss Callie Davis would swear to that lie.

And then there was no further time for consideration of the gauntlet, and how it got by the window through which Miss Callie's stolen coffin had been taken. Somewhere down by the motte, by the waterhole where the Triangle R cattle grazed, guns opened up in a quick, slamming burst of fire.

Judge Parker's jaw fell agape, and Betty Caldwell leaped to her feet in quick alarm. Miss Callie stiffened. The sheriff got down off the gallery, moving fast for a man his size, and threw the reins over his horse's neck.

"Wait, Sam!" yelled the judge. "You ain't got a gun! Take Miss Callie's rifle.

SAM KARNES paid no attention. He toed his stirrup, and put the horse into a lope down the road. He knew instinctively that the long-smoldering disputes between Joe Rankin's brush country crowd and the Clawhammer had broken into flame!

There was a silence, then two more shots hammering into the hot air of mid-afternoon, and Sam Karnes heard horses' hooves drumming against the sun-baked ground. This sound died, and the drowsy stillness came again, and the locusts took up their interrupted shrilling in the mesquites.

He swung off the wagon road, taking a short cut toward the motte. He ducked a threatening limb, and his passing aroused a rangy longhorn cow that was chewing her cud in the chaparral, and sent her hightailing for the draw.

The sheriff suddenly remembered the Reverend Cal Tyree's words from the Bible—"We will go by the high way; and if I and my cattle drink of thy water, then I will pay for it."

Then he saw two riders pulling rein in the mesquites. One of them jumped from his saddle and cursed steadily in a monotonous undertone as he held the other man, and lowered him gently to the ground. Sam Karnes recognized the wounded man as Rocky Morse, the Clawhammer foreman, and knew that Joe Rankin had paid for his water in powder and lead.

The younger man stood over Rocky, still cursing. He was Henry Ott, a raw-boned youth with fuzz still white on his cheeks. His gun holster was empty, and his hands were shaking.

"Rankin!" he said bitterly as the sheriff rode up. "Joe Rankin, damn him! He's killed Rocky!"

Rocky Morse opened his eyes. They wavered, and blinked at the bright sky, and focused on Sam Karnes's face. Sweat ran cold through a stubble of sandy whiskers on Rocky's angular jaw.

"Like hell he has!" he gritted. He made an effort to sit up, and glared at the sheriff. "You leave him alone, Sam—you leave him alone! He's my meat!"

"Take it easy, Rocky!" Sam said, and bent to examine the wound.

Rankin's bullet had entered Rocky's chest high, apparently ranging upward and loging somewhere in the shoulder.

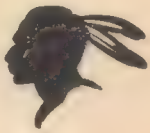
"This is between me and Rankin!" Rocky insisted. "I don't want him arrested. I won't swear to no complaint against him!"

"Put his saddle under his head, and hang the saddle blanket on this mesquite to give him some shade," Karnes told Henry Ott. "Then ride up to Miss Callie's house and get Judge Parker. The judge can take him into town in his buggy."

"You hear me, Sam?" Rocky said.

"I heard you. But it's up to me to keep the peace in this county, and I

RANGE RAMBLINGS



WELL, IT LOOKS LIKE Congress has finally decided that the American Indians can be trusted. By a voice vote, the House of Representatives recently repealed a law prohibiting the sale of guns and ammunition to hostile or uncivilized Indians.

IN THE EARLY DAYS of the old West, it was the custom —derived from the Spaniards—to drive the animals once a year to the missions in order that they might be blessed.

BECAUSE CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS often stubbed their Army boots against stones when they came to Montana to prospect for gold after the Civil War, they nicknamed Montana the Stubtoe State.

OBSERVATION OF the Collinsville, Okla., News: "The old-time cowboy was hard as nails, and feared nothing but walking, milking and a decent woman."

THE LARGEST COLONY of bats in the world is in a cave at Medina County, Tex. It has been estimated to number some 90,000,000 individuals and the evening flight from the cave lasts some 5 hours.

By HAROLD HELFER

The sheriff ripped off a portion of the foreman's shirt, and applied a bandage to the wound. People were strange. Some of them were eternally after him to arrest somebody, and here was a man who wanted to square his own accounts.

Sam Karnes guessed that loyalty to the Clawhammer and to young Tony Caldwell lay behind the shooting.

reckon this is just the start of a lot of trouble unless I get to the bottom of it right now. What happened?"

Rocky opened his lips, then closed them against a spasm of pain.

"Why, we rode up and told them boogers to bust up camp and make tracks away from the water hole," Henry Ott said. "We was talking to the segundo and the cook, setting on

our horses, plumb peaceful. All of a sudden Rankin throwed his gun up over the draw bank, and opened the dance. He got Rocky the first shot. My horse tried to join the birds, and he missed me, and I couldn't shoot straight, either. Then the segundo grabbed my arm, and twisted the gun out of my hand, and they run us out of there. They shot at us a couple of times as we left."

Rocky Morse lay with his eyes closed. "Sam," he said, "would you roll me a smoke?"

Sam Karnes complied, and held the cigarette for a moment, looking at it, before he put it between the foreman's lips. He made one for himself then, and turned to pick up his horse's reins.

"Go on up and get the judge," he told Henry Ott, and mounted to ride down toward the water hole.

ALL along he was telling himself that he had bigger fish to fry. This shooting scrape was only significant in that it had blown the lid off the tension between the Clawhammer and Rankin's crowd, and future events in Hackberry County would shape their course to the pattern of violence.

It probably had nothing at all to do with the killings. The sheriff was reasonably sure that Joe Rankin had acted hastily, and would not be around when he reached the Triangle R camp.

He was right. He skirted the water hole, and crossed the draw, coming out to the broken wire and the road that led to Tom Henry's place. The chuckwagon stood there, and two men came out to meet him.

"Where's Rankin?" he asked.

"Gone," the taller man said briefly.

"Gone where?"

"I didn't ask him. He's the boss, not me."

Sam Karnes eased sideward in his saddle, and listened to the scattered bawling of Rankin's trail herd. It was being held loosely on Tom Henry's range. Se could see a couple of riders moving around its edges, in the mesquites.

There was a point of law here. Rankin was guilty of trespassing on the Clawhammer only when his cattle watered, only when they crossed that cut barbed wire. And the sheriff would have hated to see stock go thirsty.

"I could make you talk, quick enough," he said gently. "I've seen Rocky Morse. I could take you two hombres into town as accessories to the fact, unless you want to tell me which way Joe Rankin headed."

The tall man spat sullenly. "He lit out for the Border, same as anybody else would do. You'll have the devil of a time catching up. Besides, Rocky pulled his gun first."

"I heard different," the sheriff said. "But I'm not goin' to kill my horse, chasing Joe Rankin—not with a couple of killings on my hands. He'll have to come back to this water hole, sooner or later. By the time he does, he may find the Rangers have taken over law and order in this county, and a patrol on the wire, and his cows getting mighty thirsty."

The segundo's eyes held a faint flicker of amusement.

"I reckon the Clawhammer's already got a patrol, sheriff," he said. "You come down here any night, and I'll show you Jud Caldwell's housekeeper, hanging around this live-oak motte with a gun!"

XII

BETWEEN the Hackberry water hole and town somewhere, the sheriff presumably sprained his right arm. He arrived with it in a sling made from a bandanna handkerchief and a buckskin string, and went to the High Lonesome for a bottle of beer while the doctor was working on Rocky Morse.

Few Smith sat morosely at a table

in the saloon, his crutch held across his lap as if it were the rifle he had carried for the Confederate Army, an untasted glass of whisky before him. He shook his head at Sam.

"Like I told you," he said. "I told you Webster would be on our necks, and he is. He's with the grand jury right now, asking for an indictment against Tony. What's more, he brought a couple of Rangers to town with him. You can blame Bart Keyes for that!"

The sheriff sat down heavily. Webster was the district attorney, and Sam understood Few Smith's resentment. It was like his own against the Rangers. Outsiders coming in, telling you how to run things in your own bailiwick.

Few tasted his whisky wryly.

"I got out," he said. "I left the courtroom. If they want to elect another county attorney in the fall, let 'em."

"Keyes come back?" Sam asked.

"No. He's still down in the brush, looking for Tony with that old warrant. You know what I'm afraid of, Sam? I'm afraid Tony will lose that Caldwell temper, and shoot it out!"

Sam was afraid of that, too. He drank his beer, and the friendly atmosphere of the High Lonesome, with its oil lamps reflected on the bar, seemed changed and alien. He thought of Mary, waiting for Tony to come back so they could start their life together.

He thought, One way or another, Tony might not come back, and had to fight down a quick panic that surged through him.

Wade Magill entered the saloon then, looking lonely. He came over to their table.

"I heard the grand jury's meeting," he told Few Smith. "I had to come in. If they indict Tony, Betty's going to be all busted up."

"Betty won't be the only one," Sam said grimly. He displayed his arm sling, and took tobacco and papers from his vest pocket. "Here, Wade, fix me a cigarette. I never could learn to roll one of the blamed things left-handed!"

Wade made him a smoke, but the sheriff didn't light it. He sat looking at it, lost in thought, coming to the final realization of what had to be done. He got up after a moment, and went to the doctor's office, which was above the First National Bank. The light was still on in the courthouse, across the square.

The bullet had been extracted, and Rocky Morse lay pale and quiet. Sam Karnes sat down at the side of his bed.

"You'll have to tell me where I can find Tony," he said. "Time's running out."

"So you can arrest him?" Rocky asked. "To hell with that!"

"I feel the same way, Rocky, but it's either me or Keyes. If Keyes finds him, there might be a shooting. He'd be better off in jail."

Rocky was silent for a little while. Then he said, "All right, Sam. You know where Huisache Draw makes that big bend, about twenty miles from where it runs into the Rio Grande? The chuckwagon's out there in the brush, about a mile to the west, unless they've moved. If they have, you'll have to follow the tracks. Tony will be working down toward the river, so he can get ready to take delivery on Don Enrique's cattle."

Sam thought, If he can raise the money somewheres. If he can't, and there's not enough Clawhammer cattle, he's land poor this year and busted the next.

"I reckon I kind of busted things up, tying into Rankin's crowd like I did," Rocky went on. "But you know how things have been. It had to come, sooner or later, and it's too bad things didn't pop while Jud was still alive." He sighed, and turned to ease the pain in his shoulder. "Tony sent me up here to get that money, Sam. I told Henry Ott to go on back down tonight and tell him what happened—the shooting and all."

"I'll see what I can do," Sam said evasively, and straightened, listening.

BOOT heels were going by on the wooden sidewalk, as if a group of men had been let loose. He went to the window, and saw several straggling down across the little park, and the light was out in the courthouse.

Two men moved into the illumination from the window of the Lone Star Chili Parlor next door, and the sheriff recognized Troy Holcomb, talking earnestly to a large and portly man. Troy was a member of the grand jury, and the bigger man was Webster, the district attorney.

A rider Sam didn't know came down from the direction of the livery stable, turning out on the creek road and traveling swiftly and with purpose. He guessed that this was one of the Rangers who had been brought to town, and it wasn't hard to divine the man's mission.

Sam leaned from the window to hail Holcomb and ask what action the grand jury had taken.

It was Webster who answered, peering up with the chili parlor's light in his eyes, not seeing Sam Karnes.

"Indicted Tony Caldwell," he said in a tone that implied satisfaction, and great self-importance. "Indicted him for both the killings!"

Sam closed the window against that, but Rocky Morse had heard, and the news brought him up on an elbow.

"Why, damn them!" he said bitterly. "*Both* killings! I half expected them to accuse him of killing Jud, the way things turned between them. But Tom Henry!" He shook his head, and said, after a time, "Who do you figure done it, Sam?"

"I don't know, yet," the sheriff confessed. "If they'd leave me alone, and let me work on it my way, I could find out. But the grand jury figures like I do—the man who killed Jud shot Tom to cover up. Tony was in town that night. I tried to get him to lay low, but he was proud, and bull-headed, and a lot of folks saw him. Anyway, they can't hang a man twice. Well—I reckon I'd better be riding. . . ."

Karnes had hunted cattle in this brush that stretched like a pale and limitless sea under the moon. He knew its twisting trails as well as most men, and where the infrequent and undependable watering places lay, nearly all of them far down toward the Border river.

He rode all night, with scrub mesquite scratching across his chaps and tapaderos, and plucking a jingled music from the rowels of his spurs, until the moon dropped, and the sky turned pale in the east.

The bitter memory of a quarrel with his own daughter rode with him. It was not so much what he was going to do when he went by the jail to get his canteen and a coffee pot, and a few hard biscuits tied in a flour sack. It was what he had failed to do, so far, that had unleashed Mary's tongue. She blamed him for not having found the real killer, and he had seen the same accusation, silent but strong, in Ivy's eyes.

He thought back on this, and sighed with something more than saddle weariness. Women could sometimes be unreasonable creatures, expecting the impossible, losing their patience too quickly. Things like killings took time to figure out.

Sunrise threw slanting light along the chaparral, and Sam Karnes came to the rocky bed of Huisache Draw, lying dry and bone-bleached where it made the big bend. He crossed this to the westward, pulling rein there to scan the brush, and seeing nothing. Then the first faint breeze of morning brought him the scent of mesquite wood smoke from a campfire.

He rode on, dreading the meeting. Now there were a few cattle in the brush, half-wild, wearing the Claw-hammer brand. Not enough of them to do Tony any good; not nearly enough to pay that bill Jud Caldwell had left for his barbed wire.

A little rain-washed gully twisted this way from the Huisache, and Sam followed it. He guessed that Tony would have the chuckwagon in a low place for concealment.

He came quite suddenly upon the roundup camp. Two of the Clawhammer riders were hunkered by the fire, and they dropped their tin breakfast plates and sprang to their feet, ready to go for their guns.

SAM KARNES pulled rein, and flicked his gaze across the camp, seeing Tony Caldwell turn quickly from where he bent over the wagon tongue, washing his face in a tin basin. Tony dashed the water from his eyes, and grinned with recognition, but Sam had seen the trigger sharp awareness that gripped him.

"Howdy, Sam," Tony called. "Just in time for breakfast. Light and sun your saddle."

Sam swung down, the aroma of coffee making his big stomach rumble with a hunger he didn't feel. The two riders squatted again, and Tony came toward him.

"You see Rocky and Henry Ott?" he asked. "I sent 'em up to get the money, and they ought to have reported to you. Don Enrique will have the cattle ready in a few days."

"I—I saw them," the sheriff said. "Look, Tony, Rocky ran into a little trouble. He found Rankin's outfit still camped at the water hole, and I reckon there's no reason for that unless Rankin's waiting to give you all the trouble he can when you start your drive. Anyway, Rocky ordered the Triangle R to clear out, and Rankin pulled his gun."

Tony drew a sharp breath. "Rocky's not—not dead?"

"No. He got shot up a little, though, and he'll be laid up for awhile. Joe Rankin headed back somewhere down this way."

"I'll find him," Tony said. "I'll kill that damned lobo, and then I'll run his outfit so far away from the Clawhammer their folks won't know 'em when they get home!"

"Yeah," the sheriff said, studying him. "You ain't got trouble enough, without going on the shoot for Joe Rankin! Set down, son, and listen to me. In the first place, there ain't any money in either bank. Your dad drew all of it out the day before we found him. That means whoever killed him also robbed him—of just about forty thousand dollars."

The color went out of Tony's dark face, leaving it set, and older. He sat down on a bedding roll, as if his knees had suddenly turned weak.

"Go on," he said harshly.

"Last night, the grand jury indicted you, Tony. That's why I'm here."

Tony said nothing, and Sam Karnes watched him again, and drew out his tobacco sack.

"I'd be much obliged if you'd make me a smoke," he said, and passed over the makin's. "Now, there's no use arguing, son. You'll have to go in for trial. I'd like it if you'd go in with me, and not wait."

XIII

MECHANICALLY Tony's fingers fashioned the cigarette, and he pulled the drawstring of the tobacco sack tight with clenched teeth. The sheriff could not tell what his final reaction was going to be.

He never had a chance to find out. Tony stood up and handed him the smoke. There was a sudden movement in the brush at the gully's rim, and Henry Ott's voice crying:

"Look out, Tony! Look out!"

Tony whirled. The sheriff looked that way and saw the raw-boned Clawhammer rider with his hands in the air, risking a shot by shouting that warning. Bart Keyes was just behind him, grinning down over the barrel of a Winchester. A little to one side was the Ranger Sam had seen riding out of town the night before.

Then the sheriff made a quick move

and caught Tony's wrist.

"Take it easy—take it easy, son!" he counseled. "One way or another, I reckon it makes no difference who arrests you!"

The two Clawhammer hands were caught under the other Ranger's gun, and they slowly reached skyward, glancing toward Tony for leadership. Henry Ott's boyish face was working.

"I reckon they follered me, Tony," he said. "I didn't see 'em until I turned off from the Huisache, and then they had me."

"Never mind," Tony said, and the sheriff kept that grasp on his wrist.

Bart Keyes slid out of his saddle.

"Back up against the wagon—all of you!" he ordered, moving the barrel of the thirty-gun. "Take their guns, Pete. You'll notice the sheriff don't pack one. He's too proud, and too gentle, and he don't believe in 'em!"

Sam Karnes swallowed a hot, angry feeling. Temper would do no good now. He stayed where he was until Keyes poked his ribs with the Winchester.

"I said all of you! And for your information, Karnes, it makes a lot of difference who arrests Tony. As a matter of fact"—he grinned malevolently—"you ain't got the authority to arrest him, or anybody else. You've been suspended from office, and I'm actin' sheriff of Hackberry County. I'm arresting you, too!"

Sam wondered how it would feel to plant his fist in the middle of Keyes's well-groomed red mustache. Mildly enough, he said:

"On what kind of charge?"

"Several," Keyes retorted. "Malfeasance in office. Obstruction of justice. Harboring a fugitive from justice. You had Tony Caldwell in jail the other night, the night Tom Henry was killed. Tony was a wanted man then, and you knew it. You made no attempt to keep him there."

"Shucks, no," Sam said in disgust.

Pete dropped the Clawhammer guns into a *morral* he was carrying.

"That's where you made your big mistake, Karnes," Bart Keyes said. "You could have saved a lot of trouble, and maybe your job. It's too late now."

Tony pulled his black brows together, a steadiness coming over him.

"Keyes," he said, "I'll come in later and give myself up, if they're bound to try me. But if I go to jail now, I'll lose everything. I've got a deal on for some Mexican cattle. Nobody else can handle it."

"That's tough," Keyes said without sympathy, and turned toward the campfire. "If anybody wants any breakfast, he'd better pitch in. The four of us are riding for Hackberry, right away. Pete, pour me a cup of that coffee."

Tony Caldwell looked longingly out over the brush, and the sheriff followed his glance, and knew what he was hoping. There would be two or three Clawhammer men out there, but they had left early to hunt cattle, and their return was not likely. At any rate, Sam reflected, resistance would only make larger troubles.

He squatted by the fire, and drank coffee from a tin cup, and felt a great weariness descend upon his heavy shoulders. Most of this was nothing but political maneuvering on the part of Bart Keyes. A prompt arrest of Tony, immediately after the indictment, would look good to the district attorney and the district judge, and whatever voters of the county who might be dissatisfied with Sam Karnes's easy-going ways.

THE Ranger was out to show up Sam, and make a name for efficiency before the fall elections. If he hanged a man, meanwhile, it meant nothing to him. Just now, there was nothing the sheriff could do but bide his time.

They started the long ride back to Hackberry a little later, with Sam and Tony riding in the middle, between the two officers. Tony looked back

from the gully rim, and saw the Claw-hammer hands standing helplessly, watching his departure, and saw the misery in Henry Ott's eyes.

"Keep on with the gather, boys!" Tony called. "And tell Don Enrique the deal is still on. I'll be back down here in a few days, to take delivery."

"Oh, sure you will!" Bart Keyes laughed. "You'll be lucky if you don't stretch a rope!"

The sun climbed, and the day's first heat waves moved over the brush, but there was no wind. The air was uncommonly sticky, Sam thought, and the gnats were bad. He saw clouds making up down in the southwest. It looked a little like rain, and the sheriff had an idea that a rain might help him find the solution to the two killings.

That day, he came back at sundown to his own jail, a prisoner. Ivy, seeing the cell door swing shut and confine him in the place where Tom Henry had been mysteriously killed, burst suddenly into tears.

Sam stared at her, unable to comprehend the outburst. He was home, wasn't he? He felt no disgrace, and, as a matter of fact, things might be working out to the best advantage. There was nothing he needed at the moment more than rest and quiet, and some of Ivy's cooking, and a chance to think things out until he knew who the killer was.

Mary cried, too, and Bart Keyes almost had to pry her out of Tony's arms. He put Tony in the cell farthest from Sam, and turned to Ivy.

"Pete Sellers will be the jailer here, Mrs. Karnes," he said. "But I reckon we'll have to trust you some. I figure you're smart enough to know that if either of these prisoners gets out, he runs a chance of being shot down, so things could be worse. You'll have to do the cooking, and Pete will give you the run of the jail."

"I live here," Ivy retorted, with something of her old spirit. "And so does Sam. If you think—"

"I'll be out around the county a lot," Keyes went on. "But don't forget this. I'm the acting sheriff."

Ivy turned away from him. "Sam," she said loyally, "there's something you ought to know. The mercantile store checked up on that white-handled gun, the one that killed Tom Henry. It belonged to Wade Magill!"

"Wade Magill?" the sheriff echoed.

Bart Keyes flushed and gnawed at the edge of his red mustache. Sam was remembering those occasions when Wade had seemed bent on throwing suspicion toward Miss Callie Davis.

"Don't try throwing me off the track!" Bart Keyes said sharply. "I don't ever remember seeing Wade pack that gun, and Tony could have taken it out of Wade's house, easy as not. I don't think Wade had anything to do with either killing."

"You know damned well he didn't!" Tony blazed from his cell down the hall. "You may as well admit that you haven't got any idea *who* did it. Just as long as there's a trial, and somebody to be the goat while you play politics, you're satisfied!"

Keyes looked back over his shoulder.

"The district attorney thinks he knows who's guilty," he said significantly. "That's good enough for me. If you want to blame anybody for being where you are, blame Karnes. He had his chance, and he bungled the whole deal from the start!"

Sam Karnes watched the sundown fade behind a bank of threatening clouds, but the rain didn't come. From his cell window, he saw Troy Holcomb cross the square and turn toward the jail, picking up his buttoned shoes carefully in the dusty street. The word had got around, Sam told himself, and a minute later he heard Ivy letting the bank official in.

HOLCOMB stood in the shadowy hallway, and looked embarrassed.

"Sam," he said, "I sure hated to hear about this. Maybe if you could

get them to fix you a bail bond, and it wasn't too high, I could do something about it."

"Much obliged, Troy," the sheriff said, and was cheered by the knowledge that he still had friends. "But I reckon I ought to let my chips ride for awhile. I've been thinking about something Bart Keyes said a little while ago. The important thing is to get this case solved, and maybe I bungled it. If Bart would get out and work, and clear it up proper, I'd be the first one to give him three cheers."

Holcomb shook his head.

"I haven't got too much hope of Keyes's ability to do anything but round up votes for himself," he admitted. "But I came over here for some other business, too. I want to talk to Tony."

"Go ahead," Tony said.

Holcomb moved a little way down the hall, clearing his throat.

"Well, the fact is," he said, "Joe Rankin and Carson Tate dropped in on me a couple of days ago, and asked me if I'd help. Understand, now, I have no personal interest in this, Tony. I'm just a sort of mediator."

"Go on," Tony said.

"Rankin and Tate want to buy the Clawhammer. They're willing to make you a reasonable offer."

Tony laughed coldly. "I'd see them both in hell with their backs broke before I'd sell 'em an inch!" he declared. "And if you see Rankin, tell him that when I get out of here, he'd better be scarce and hard to find. I'll make him wish he'd shot himself, instead of Rocky Morse!"

Holcomb hesitated, and Sam Karnes got the banker to roll him a cigarette.

"There's something you don't know about, Tony," Holcomb went on. "They struck water in Wade Magill's well today—good water. You know what that means? If they can find it there, they ought to be able to drill almost anywhere in this part of Texas. In other words, all dry range is going to be worth more, and watered range will drop, in comparison. A man won't have to own a water hole any more. The Clawhammer might take a drop in value."

"I don't give a hang if the bottom drops out!" Tony said emphatically. "It belongs to Betty and me. I know she'll want to hold onto it, and that's what I aim to do!"

XIV

FOR Ivy Karnes, those next two days were trying ones. Pete Sellers, the Ranger Keyes had made jailer, ate as much as three men, and was always hanging around the kitchen door.

The talk of the forthcoming trial went around the town for Mary to hear, and she needed cheering up. And there was big, lazy Sam Karnes, taking his ease in a cell, more like a hotel guest than a prisoner.

Sam demanded a lot of attention. He was always calling Ivy to bring him this, and that, and a cup of coffee. At night before he blew out the oil lamp, he wanted her to step out into the yard and see what the weather looked like.

"I've got a hunch," he said. "I figure it's going to rain."

Ivy put her hands on her hips, and regarded him with something approaching exasperation.

"What if it is?" she demanded. "*You* won't be out in it. I declare to goodness, Sam Karnes, sometimes I think you're the laziest white man I ever saw!"

But she went out, and took a cursory glance at the heavens, and came back to report that there were no stars. Sam lay down on his cot, and let his mind go back over the observations he had made at the motte, and at Miss Callie's. Women were like that. Ivy couldn't understand that he was working hard on the killer mystery.

He called for a pencil the next day, and when she brought it, impatiently,

he remembered that he had forgotten to ask her to supply him with writing paper. She hurried back to the kitchen, and it was plain she wasn't in too good a humor.

Sam sighed, and rolled over to face the white plaster wall. He began putting names down there. Tony Caldwell's, with certain observations after it, and the names of Tom Henry and Wade Magill, Joe Rankin and Miss Callie Davis. He added Carson Tate's, then drew a line through it. He knew nothing about Carson Tate's movements on the night of either killing. And everything ended in a question mark, no matter how his mind probed. They all had had reasons to kill Jud Caldwell; they all had had the opportunity.

When everything was summed up, he saw how black the future looked for Tony. Tom Henry had threatened Jud, but Tom was dead. Tony had told Joe Rankin that he was going to get even with his father, Tony had even gone so far as to form an alliance with Joe, that night of the killing.

Everything came back to the money, and that ended in a question mark, too. But the forty thousand dollars Jud Caldwell carried in his wagon was at least something tangible, if it could be found.

Troy Holcomb had said there was about six hundred pounds of silver. Some of the rest of the money was bound to have been in gold. The vaqueros who worked on the ranches didn't trust paper money, and neither did a lot of the old-timers who remembered sad experiences with Confederate currency.

"More than six hundred pounds," the sheriff muttered. "Too heavy to pack on a saddle horse, in one trip. And the only wagon tracks at the motte were made by Jud's wagon."

He could trace Jud's wagon. It had been to Miss Callie's to get the coffin. It had come later, empty and driverless, to the Clawhammer headquarters.

He rolled over to the wall again, and wrote after Miss Callie's name:

> Could have unloaded money at house & hid it there when she drove wagon there for coffin.

Then he got up, and paced thoughtfully for a time, and looked out the window. Pete Sellers was out there in the office, sitting in Sam's favorite chair, like he owned it. Up the street, he could hear Fritz-the-Dutchman tapping away industriously.

He called Ivy again.

"I'd sure be much obliged if you'd do something for me," he said. "Go up and ask Fritz-the-Dutchman if he can give you a list of all his customers, with the sizes of boots he's made for 'em. Maybe he ain't got exact sizes, being as how every pair is made special. But tell him it's important that I get a list showing sizes as near as he can come to 'em."

IVY stared. "Anything else you want, Mr. Karnes?" she asked sarcastically. "I ain't got anything to do, you know, aside from waiting on you hand and foot!"

"Well," Sam said, "I'd kind of like to have my chair inside here with me. It don't look right, Sellers setting in it that way. It looks like he's trying to take over the job of keeping the peace in this here county."

That next morning, a slow drizzle descended over the mulberry trees in the little park, and water ran musically from the eaves of the county jail. Miss Callie drove in with the wagon, wearing a man's slicker, and held a whispered conference with Tony and Mary down the hall.

Sam Karnes knew that their secretiveness was for the benefit of Pete Sellers and not himself, but he felt a little hurt by it, just the same. Later, Mary put on his old slicker and went out with Miss Callie. They didn't come back.

The drizzle kept up all day, but it was nothing that would set the dry

draws running, and Sam didn't get excited about it. He pulled his chair up to face the white plaster wall, and studied a new list he had written there, a list that would have made sense to nobody else but Fritz-the-Dutchman.

He was still doing this when Bart Keyes returned to the jail in the late afternoon. Sam hastily spread a newspaper over an array of cigarettes he had lying on his table, and asked Keyes to come into the cell.

Sellers unlocked the door, and the red-mustached Ranger entered suspiciously, then stared at the writing on the wall.

"What the devil's all that?" he demanded.

"Not so loud!" Sam warned. "Ivy wouldn't like it, maybe. But I want to show you something. I want to explain my theory of the killings to you. You see them names?"

Keyes snorted derisively. "You can cross out all of 'em but Tony's!" he declared. "No use being a stubborn fool about it, Karnes. I've been going over the evidence with the district attorney this afternoon, and if he don't convict Tony, nobody will ever be convicted!"

"Not necessarily," Sam said patiently. "I can show you—"

"You can't show me anything. It's simple. If Tony didn't kill Jud Caldwell, who did?"

"Well, I got it whittled down to several candidates," Sam said, pointing to the list. "You see here? I scratched Tom Henry's name. Tony is out of the running, and so is Carson Tate. But Wade Magill and Miss Callie are still on the list. As far as that's concerned, I've even got your name."

"*My* name?" echoed Keyes. "Why?"

"Because you take the same size boots as Jud Caldwell wore. Now, Tony wears—"

"Are you loco?" Keyes demanded, his eyes bulging. "Look, Karnes, nobody else had as many reasons to kill Jud Caldwell as Tony had. Can you understand that?"

"Yes, but it don't prove anything," Sam sighed. "I've got more reasons for killing *you* than anybody else might have. But I haven't killed you, have I? As a matter of fact, I don't aim to. What I aim to do"—and now he was out of his chair and shuffling toward Keyes with the bearlike gait— "what I aim to do, one of these days, is to whip the everlasting tar out of you!"

"Set down!" Keyes said. "Open this door, Sellers. Karnes has gone crazy!"

Sam laughed, and sat down. The burly Ranger stepped out into the hall, and looked in at him.

"You'll have more'n an arm in a sling if you ever are so misguided as to try whipping me!" he warned. "I can beat you any way you want—with fists, or guns, or votes. You know where I'm heading tonight, Karnes? I'm riding down to San Antone, to turn my resignation in to my Ranger captain and let him send it to Austin. That's how sure I am that I can lick you next month when the elections roll around!"

"Better just ask him for a furlough," Sam advised. "There's a lot of good men out of work."

But that night he lay long awake, worrying over the things Keyes had said. He hadn't realized the election was so near. Time was running out in more ways than one.

A CONFERENCE with Few Smith, the next day, didn't help Sam's mental attitude. As Few pointed out, nobody could ever tell what a jury was going to do. Webster and Keyes might easily hang Tony Caldwell, just by harping on that simple argument that if Tony hadn't killed Jud, who had?

Sam was too easy-going, too naturally lazy, to be active in seeking either glory or votes. He had been willing to explain his theories to Bart Keyes; he would willingly have let Keyes

take over the assignment of actually going out to round up the killer. But Keyes wouldn't listen.

Sam sighed, and moped on his cot most of the day, and annoyed Ivy with a dozen small errands aimed at his comfort. Pete Sellers spent his time hanging around the kitchen door, and getting underfoot when Ivy cleaned house. Mary hadn't returned.

It must have been nearly midnight when the front door rattled, and Ivy got up to light the lamp in her room. Sam Karnes saw its brightness spill into the hallway. He heard Ivy calling to Pete Sellers to come with the keys, and Sellers stamped into his boots and emerged sleepily down the hall.

The keys rattled as Pete went by. He stood at the door, and called:

"Who's there?"

"Mary. Mary Caldwell."

It was the first time, the sheriff thought, that he had heard her use that name, and he noted a certain curious pride in the way she said it. He heard the drizzle fluting from the eaves, and then Pete Sellers opened the door, and Mary came in with water dripping from the slicker.

Sellers started back down the hall, yawning. Then the light from Ivy's room glistened on the wet slicker Mary wore, and fell on her face.

The sheriff jerked upright at what he saw there. He started to call to Mary, but it was too late. Her hand came out from under the folds of the oversized slicker, and the light struck a blue glint from the barrel of a pistol. She thrust this suddenly against Pete Seller's ribs.

"Put up your hands!" she ordered. "Turn around—and keep them up, or I'll shoot you! Now back up to the door of Tony's cell!"

Sellers gasped, and slowly raised his arms. There was a sixgun in his holster, and anger was wiping the first surprise out of his eyes. Sam Karnes knew he would use the gun if he had a chance!

Sam came hastily out of bed, grabbing his trousers.

"Wait a minute, Mary!" he said. "Don't make things worse! Put down that gun!"

"Keep out of this, Sam!" Tony interrupted, and there was a fierce, proud possessiveness in his voice. "Leave her alone. She knows what she's doing!"

It appeared that she did, for when Pete Sellers slowly turned around to face her, she was back out of the possible reach of his arms, and her gun was still steady upon him. Sam Karnes could not help feeling a little pride himself.

Her eyes flashed, and her chin was high.

"Things couldn't be any worse, Dad," she said. "And they'll get no better as long as you lie around, doing nothing to clear Tony! Back up there, Mr. Sellers!"

The Ranger hesitated, and glanced toward Sam Karnes. Sam shrugged his shoulders helplessly. Sellers backed up, his boot heels scraping the floor, until he was against the cell door. The butt of his gun rattled against a bar there, and Tony Caldwell reached out and lifted it out of his holster.

The sheriff saw Ivy standing across the hall, her face tense and pale with this new worry, her hands twisting nervously at the front of her night robe.

"All right, Sellers!" Tony said exultantly. "Unlock this door!—Have you got the horses, honey?"

"They're outside," Mary said. "I've got everything."

Tony strode into the hall. He hugged her briefly, not taking his eyes off Sellers. He walked as Jud Caldwell had walked, with a little bit of arrogance, toward Sam's door.

"We're riding for the Border," he said briefly. "Sellers is going with us, far enough so he won't do any harm, anyway. I'll come back and stand trial, Sam, but not until I've got the

cattle from Don Enrique! Not until there are two Clawhammer herds on the trail!"

XV

PETE SELLERS was allowed to get his hat and jumper. He came by Sam's cell with the anger and amazement still on his face. He looked at the sheriff, and licked his lips nervously.

"Sam, you'd better stop this!" he warned. "You know what Bart Keyes will do when he comes back. He'll hunt Tony down if it takes him a year."

"Get moving," Tony said. "Come on, honey."

They were gone then, for better or worse, and there was a brief sound of horses' hooves moving out on the creek road, and then only the soft music of water dripping from the roof. Sam Karnes sat down on the edge of his cot, and scratched his head in bewilderment.

"I can't figure what good busting out of jail is going to do," he complained. "I don't figure Tony stands a chance of talking Don Enrique out of them steers on credit, so leaving this way just makes things worse. And Mary—"

"Mary's sick and tired of seeing you lie around this way, doing nothing!" Ivy snapped. She brought a lamp to the cell door, and looked at him, and for the first time she saw how he had been writing on the wall by his cot. "Well, I never!" she exclaimed. "Sam Karnes, I won't have you in here another minute, messing up my nice white walls that way! You get out. Do you hear me? Get out and do something!"

Sam stared. "But I can't get out, honey," he pointed out mildly.

"I'll fix that!" Ivy retorted.

She strode angrily to the door of the cell where Tony had been, and came back with the keys rattling.

"The whole thing is your fault!" she said. "You and your easy-going ways! You and your idea that a sheriff don't need to pack a gun!"

"But, listen, honey—"

"Don't honey me!" Ivy blazed. "Look at what's happened! Your own daughter breaking the law, holding up a Ranger and getting her husband out of jail! It's like she said. Things couldn't be any worse. Now get out of here and find the man who killed Jud Caldwell and Tom Henry! And don't come back till you do!"

Sam Karnes gulped. She was bustling into another room, coming back with the pistol he hadn't carried for several years, bringing a box of cartridges with it. She thrust these into his hands, unlocked the cell door, and faced him angrily.

"Get out!" she said.

Sam went out, and felt the drizzle on his face, and stood for a moment in front of the place, thinking. Things had come to a fine pass when a man got thrown out of his own jail. It just showed that you would never understand a woman, or know what one was going to do. They were unpredictable, unreasonable.

He looked up at the sky, and decided it wasn't going to rain any harder that night, and that it was too late to start working on the case, anyway. He tried the door knob tentatively, but Ivy had locked him out. It wouldn't do to be seen around the hotel, or any other place in town, because this was something he couldn't explain.

The drizzle was wetting him. He wandered disconsolately around the jail, and into the stable at the rear, feeling a little sorry for himself. His horse whickered softly, and he rubbed the animal's nose and sighed.

He crawled into the soft, loose hay in the loft, and tried to go back to sleep. But sleep wouldn't come easily. Thoughts chased themselves around his mind like squirrels in a cage, and he came to the conclusion that he ought not to blame Ivy. She was tired out, and having to put up with a lot, and he guessed she was right.

If he hadn't been so soft-hearted, a lot of things could have been prevented. . . .

HE AWOKE to sunlight streaming through chinks in the wall of the loft, making little shafts of silver where the dust motes swam. He sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, remembering what had happened. And then he heard Bart Keyes' voice.

"I don't give a hoot for any excuses!" the Ranger was shouting. "All of you can be held to answer for this! Jail delivery! Letting a killer loose again!"

"Tony Caldwell is no killer!" Ivy's voice said.

"The devil he's not!" Keyes flared.

His boots clicked on the back steps, and Sam heard his horse in the yard. Keyes said, "You want me to tell you what happened last night, Mrs. Karnes? You want to know what Tony did after you turned him loose? He killed Joe Rankin, that's all!"

"Joe Rankin?" Ivy faltered.

"That's what I said. I rode back by way of the Hackberry water hole. I got there before daylight. The Triangle R outfit had just found Joe with a bullet in his back, down by the water hole. Joe had been in town. They heard a shot at the water hole, and his horse come into camp with an empty saddle. They looked, and found his body."

"Tony didn't do it," Ivy said, and Sam Karnes knew she was crying.

He put his eye to a crack and saw her at the back door, wringing her apron in her hands, and Bart Keyes shaking his fist at her.

"Tony sure as hell did do it—and he'll hang higher than a kite, this time!" he yelled. "And you and your daughter and your worthless husband will all be prosecuted for helping him get away!"

He turned angrily on his heel, and picked up his horse's reins. He was cursing out loud as he led the horse toward the barn. And Sam Karnes heard his own voice swearing softly as he slid quickly down out of the loft.

Nobody could talk to Ivy like that! Nobody was going to make her cry!

The sheriff jerked that bandanna sling from his neck, and stood just aside from the door. Bart Keyes came striding through, his eyes straight ahead, Sam Karnes reached out and grabbed him.

Keyes ripped out an oath of surprise, and tried to turn in Sam's grasp. The sheriff brought his forearm up under Keyes's chin, and held him with that grip while he reached down and yanked at the Ranger's belt-buckle. Gun and belt fell to the ground, and Sam Karnes kicked them out of the way.

Then he turned Keyes loose. Over the Ranger's shoulder, he saw the back door of the jail close. Ivy had gone inside, weeping.

Keyes faced him, breathing hard, his gray eyes turning small with rage.

"So you still think you can whip me, eh?" he said. "I'll give you a chance to crawl, Karnes. Walk back into that jail cell while you can still stand up!"

The sheriff unbuckled his own gun-belt, and hung it on a nail. He moved deliberately, with the slow, shuffling gait of a dancing bear. He circled once around Keyes, put his back to the door, and reached out behind him to close it.

Then Keyes grunted, and moved in behind a flailing fist that grazed along Sam's jaw. Sam gave ground. He lashed out, and missed, and saw the Ranger boring in again through a haze of dust that rose from the hay that sprinkled the hard-packed ground—dust that swirled up, and turned unaccountably red.

That was Keyes's fist driving into his stomach, hurting him, slamming out the wind he needed. That was the kind of punch he had to avoid. He gasped, and swung a hard right hand around, more from pure instinct than from any skill at boxing. It jarred

against the side of the Ranger's head and sent him crashing back into the barn wall.

The sheriff drew in a great gulp of air. Bart Keyes bounced back, but he was more wary this time. He aimed a couple of short, choppy blows, trying to knock down Sam's guard, trying to get in another body punch, and when he failed in that, he looped his left fist up and drove it against the sheriff's mouth.

SAM'S head snapped back. He tasted blood, warm and salty, from a split in his lower lip. He saw Keyes coming in joyously, sure of himself now, panting curses as he slammed furiously at Sam's guard. Keyes had forgotten the deadliness of Sam Karnes's punch. He was driving a right uppercut toward the sheriff's jaw.

Sam Karnes gave ground again. He took a jab that would have floored a smaller man. He fed the Ranger's eagerness by backing up, by shuffling sideward, until he felt the wall against his shoulders, the planks shaking under the impact. He gambled then, shoving Keyes back with his left elbow, bringing his right arm around in a sweep that could have broken Keyes's neck if it had landed.

It missed. Keyes rushed in closer than he had been before, and jarred one chopping hook against the sheriff's jaw. At that instant, Sam Karnes changed his tactics and became a wrestler instead of a fist fighter.

His powerful right arm closed around the other man and yanked him in close. He threw his left around Keyes's neck and squeezed, and the Ranger's fists were powerless. Keyes gasped, trying hard to get the older man in his own embrace, but Sam Karnes let his grip slide down a little, and pinned one of Keyes's arms.

It took only a little while, after that, It was like a bear's hug, a deflating, bone-crushing, numbing force that could take the life out of whatever it held. The sheriff squeezed until he saw Keyes's eyes bulge, and heard his breath wheeze and stop.

Then he lifted the Ranger off his feet, and slammed him down on the hard-packed dirt floor. He tied him there, with all the skill of years at handling a pigging string, and thoughtfully knotted a piece of short rope across his mouth.

No use having him make a noise, and disturb Ivy. She was upset enough already.

He put Keyes on his shoulder, and eyed the loft ladder speculatively. He was strong enough to carry the burly man up there, but the ladder rungs probably wouldn't stand the strain. He compromised by dumping the trussed man unceremoniously into the far corner of an empty stall, then set about the business of leisurely currying and saddling his horse.

One more thing was important. The weather. Big Sam Karnes stepped outside and looked at the sky, and grunted his pleasure at what he saw there—thunderheads making up this early in the day, climbing dark and threatening into the southeast. If they broke, it would be more than a drizzle.

The range country was still parched. It needed rain. And Sam Karnes needed at least the threat of a good rain, to throw his loop on the killer.

Keyes was conscious when Karnes went back in. Sam stood over him and looked into his baleful eyes.

"Bart," he said softly, "time you're a little older, you'll learn that a man can be crowded just so far. After that, he just naturally up and kicks the bark off the branding chute, same as a wall-eyed steer. Like me, I never done you any harm. You come into this town, all full of vinegar and ambition, and you decided I was an easy mark. You made a mistake, there."

Bart Keyes squirmed, and made a choking noise, and his eyes said he would kill Sam Karnes if he could get on his feet. He strained against his bonds, and got nowhere.

"You might as well take it easy, Bart," Sam said. "You might be here quite a spell." He picked up Keyes's gunbelt, crossed it over his own, and grinned. "*Two* guns! I reckon you was right about one thing. Maybe I ought to have been tougher. But I like to do things my way, and maybe I got tough in time. Take it easy, Bart."

He led his horse out of the stall, and put the Ranger's mount in its place, stripping off saddle and bridle, and tossing the animal a chip of hay. He swung into saddle, barring the stable door behind him, and rode by Ivy's window.

She came there, her eyes red from crying, when he tapped on the glass. He didn't give her a chance to speak.

"They'll be around here before long, honey," he said. "Some of Rankin's men must have come to town with Keyes. I reckon Webster and the others will be here, and they'll find out about the jail break. They'll be asking where Bart Keyes went. You don't know. Far as you know, he lit out to try bringing Tony back."

Then he rode out under the threatening sky, and turned down the creek road. Nobody, so far as he knew, saw him leaving town.

XVI

NOW Sam Karnes had finally been stung into action, and brought to the unwelcome realization that he had to be tough. But what he did subsequently was more characteristic of him as a man, and entirely in keeping with his record as a law-enforcement officer.

He had caught the Jessup boys, that time, by waiting at a water hole on the Nueces trail. He was gambling now that he could catch the killer of Jud Caldwell—*and,* he thought sharply, the killer of Tom Henry and Joe Rankin—in the same way.

So he rode to the Hackberry motte, proceeding cautiously along the last few miles, and leaving the road for the cover of the mesquites. He did not want to meet up with anybody and he could learn nothing by studying the road for tracks, because last night's drizzle had wiped them out.

He unsaddled and tethered his horse in a thick clump of live-oak and hackberry trees, a little way up the creek from the mound of dirt that still marked Jud Caldwell's unfinished grave. The thicket gave concealment, and he could still observe what went on yonder on the farther bank, near the Triangle R camp.

There would be a bit of business to handle with Rankin's segundo, but it had to wait.

The sheriff spread his saddle blanket, and took his ease on it, smoking and fanning at the gnats that swarmed around as a further promise of rain was coming. After a couple of hours, horsemen and Judge Parker's buggy came out from town, and Sam saw that Webster, the district attorney, was with the judge.

He heard most of the proceedings in the inquest for Joe Rankin. The Triangle R segundo led the party to a spot just above the fallen live-oak that lay under the creek bank, and showed them where Joe Rankin had been shot from his horse. His voice turned loud and angry, and he coupled several oaths to the name of Tony Caldwell.

"I knew he had busted out of jail!" the segundo declared. "I knew he was loose, the minute we found Joe. He threatened to get Joe when Rocky Morse got shot, didn't he? Well, a jury trial's too good for him! He ought to be lynched, and I'll throw the rope over the limb if any of you will go with me!"

There was a stir in the gathering, and more loud voices, and Sam Karnes saw that the temper of Hackberry would not need much to turn the town toward mob violence. But Judge Parker threw away a cud of tobacco and started to remonstrate against this, and Webster interrupted him.

Webster made what really

amounted to a campaign speech for Bart Keyes. He was bare-headed, and his silver mane gleamed, and he orated on letting the law take its course.

"I can promise you that Tony Caldwell will get a quick trial, and I can promise you a certain conviction!" he declared. "He'll hang for these three killings. But let the law hang him, and not a lynch mob!"

"After he's killed somebody else!" sneered the segundo. "The law let him get loose, didn't it?"

"Sam Karnes did that," Webster retorted. "You can put the blame for all three killings at the door of Sam Karnes, and his laxity. Fortunately, Karnes is out, and Bart Keyes is handling the sheriff's office. Keyes is a good man. You can be sure that he'll round up Tony Caldwell."

Sam grinned, thinking of Keyes lying hogtied in the hay. He saw Wade Magill listening to Webster with what looked like an expression of disgust, and Troy Holcomb edged around the group—a small man wanting to be heard, and commanding respect because of the credit he controlled.

"Joe Rankin was my friend," Troy declared. "But he was wrong in one thing. The courts upheld Jud Caldwell's water rights here, and Joe should have respected that ruling. I'm not saying that Joe cut the wire, but somebody did, and he should have driven this herd on up the trail instead of letting it water here!"

THERE was argument about that, and Sam fidgeted. It had nothing to do with the inquest, and he wanted the inquest over with. He charitably allowed that he might have misjudged Holcomb's intercession for Rankin and Tate. Perhaps, after all, the bank official had been acting in strict neutrality.

Then Judge Parker rendered his verdict, and Sam could not hear it. The segundo was still advocating a lynching party to comb the brush for Tony Caldwell. Carson Tate conferred with Holcomb, and then Holcomb climbed into the buggy with the judge and Webster, and the party started back for town.

Wade Magill was still there. Sam Karnes watched narrowly for a little while, then got up and put the saddle back on his horse. He swung astride, grunting with grim amusement when the unaccustomed two guns got in his way, and rode wide into the mesquites to come down from the north on the other side of the water hole.

There were six men to watch him when he came suddenly out of the chaparral, and got heavily down from the horse a few yards from the chuckwagon. Carson Tate's stooped shoulders lifted slightly as he stared at the sheriff. Wade Magill grinned, as if glad to see him. But Rankin's segundo stepped forward, glaring, and the other three were Triangle R hands.

"You're feeding off your range, Karnes!" the segundo said. "You ain't a lawdog no more, and this time I ain't taking any of your lip!"

"And you ain't giving me any, either," Sam retorted. "I didn't come over here to talk. Get this herd together, and string it out on the trail. Hitch up this chuckwagon. In other words, hightail out of here pronto!"

Surprise was on his side, cutting down the odds. The segundo's jaw sagged, and by the time he snapped it shut over an oath and reached for his holster, Sam Karnes had both guns out in a double draw that made Wade Magill think of lazy lightning.

One of them cracked, and the segundo yelped and grabbed his right arm. Sam swung the smoking muzzle toward the other Triangle R hands, and froze them where they stood. Carson Tate started to say something, but changed his mind. After all, he was something of an outsider in the camp, and now he was glad of it.

"Pick up that pistol for me, Wade," the sheriff said softly. "And take the guns off the others. And while we're on the subject of shooting irons, I

want to ask you something. That bone-handled forty-four that killed Tom Henry belonged to you. What about it?"

Wade straightened, with the segundo's weapon in his hand. The little sun wrinkles around his eyes tightened curiously.

"Why then, it looks like Tom's death *was* a suicide!" he said slowly. "I sold Tom Henry that gun six months ago. You know I never packed it."

"Got any kind of receipt?"

"No. But I sold it to him, like I said."

The sheriff sighed. Another blind trail. But he remembered how things were between Wade and Betty Caldwell, and he wanted to believe Wade. He turned his attention to the Triangle R segundo who stood grimacing with pain, blood trickling between the fingers that gripped his forearm.

"Get your men working!" Sam ordered. "I want chuckwagon, cattle and all gone from this motte inside an hour—Wade, I probably ain't got the legal right to do it, but I'm swearing you in as deputy to ride herd on this outfit till it's on Tate's range. Will you take the job?"

Wade Magill grinned. "You damn right, I will!" he said.

The Triangle R strung out to the northward a little later, with the segundo driving the wagon with his one good arm, and the cook taking his place in the saddle. There had been no further argument, and Sam Karnes told himself that there might be no more trouble between Rankin's old crowd and the Clawhammer.

But he went back to the other side of the water hole with no feeling of triumph. It had been too late. Too late to save Joe Rankin's life, or the pain of Rocky Morse's wound.

IN SPITE of his conversion to toughness, the sheriff still believed, at heart, in the efficacy of soft-spoken, persuasive words.

He had driven away the Triangle R from no more lofty a motive than to clear the motte for action, to have it all to himself. He took the coffee pot from his saddle, built a small fire in the thicket, and had coffee with the hard biscuits he had brought back, untouched, from the excursion after Tony. Then he sprawled on the saddle blanket again and waited for darkness to come.

Finally the sun dropped behind towering clouds. There was an intermittent play of summer lightning in the east, and the moon came late and was hidden. The black clouds moved overhead, sullenly refusing to give rain, and the lightning came with them, showing everything in a fitful, split-second brilliance, leaving the world darker than before.

Frogs chortled at the edge of the water holes. The locusts shrilled, and were awed into silence by the rumble of thunder. Somewhere toward the hills, a coyote yapped.

Then Sam Karnes heard a noise

nearer at hand, a rustling of the dry leaves toward the grave that had been dug for Jud Caldwell. He got to his feet and went stealthily that way, taking concealment behind the trunks of the larger trees.

Lightning came again, but the thick branches overhead shut out most of its short glimmer. He caught the faint outline of a figure against the bole of the tree that shaded the grave. He saw a glint on gun steel, then everything was dark again.

He waited, holding his breath against a tension, feeling that he was near the end of a long trail. Thunder boomed in a long, deep roll, drowning all other sounds. The sheriff sprang forward in that instant, and grabbed in the blackness. His hands closed on the slippery feel of a slicker.

He yanked this toward him. There was a soft collision against his big body, and his arms closed around the prowler. He heard a half-strangled gasp, then suddenly was fighting a furious, almost feline resistance that amounted to an attack.

Miss Callie, sure enough! he thought.

The memory of her name still on the wall of the cell flashed into his mind, and what Rankin's segundo had said about her patrolling the motte.

He dragged her toward the open, surprised at her savage strength. Nails ripped at his face. He shielded it as best he could with one arm, and held her with the other. She kicked his shins.

"Settle down, you blamed wildcat!" he panted. "I ain't going to hurt you!"

The attack ceased suddenly.

"Oh—Sam Karnes!" his prisoner said, and it wasn't Miss Callie, after all. It was Betty Caldwell.

XVII

WEAKNESS born of bewilderment passed over the sheriff. He shook his head, and took Betty's arm, leading her to the cover of the thicker trees before lightning came again. He sat down there on a fallen log.

"Well, it beats me!" he said. "How come *you're* prowling around down here? This ain't a safe place. There's been two killings here already, and maybe there'll be another one tonight. You get home where you belong!"

Betty hesitated. "I—I'm not afraid for myself!" she said, and the Caldwell pride was strong in her voice.

"Well, who are you worried about then? Wade Magill? I sent him up to the T-Four Connected. He's safe enough."

"It's Aunt Callie," the girl said slowly. "Sam, she took Dad's death a lot harder than anybody knows. She was in love with him, once, and I reckon she never got over it. I'm afraid her mind has been affected, Sam! She's been coming down here for the last several nights, carrying a gun. Don't you see why I'm worried? It may have been Aunt Callie who killed Joe Rankin!"

"Maybe," Sam said. "I hope not, Betty. Because I figure that whoever it was that killed Rankin also done the other killings. I'd hate to think of her doing that. Besides, it never has seemed to me like a woman's job."

"Oh, she *couldn't* have!" Betty said fiercely. "Not—not Dad, anyway!"

Sam Karnes was silent for a space, thinking of what Judge Parker had said about a woman who has been given the go-by, knowing that love sometimes turns, all to easily, into hate.

"Anything else she's done that might be a clue?" he finally said. "Did you ask her why she prowled around down here?"

"She said a killer always comes back to the scene of the crime," Betty answered, and the sheriff almost smiled to himself in the lightning-spaced darkness.

He knew that the old saying was far from being true in the majority of cases. But it happened to be exactly what he was counting on, here at

the motte where two men had been killed.

"And then there was the money," Betty went on. "She wouldn't say where she got it."

Sam jumped. "What money?"

"Why, all that money she gave Mary to take to Tony, yesterday. It was enough to pay for the cattle he wants to buy from Don Enrique. It filled a couple of big saddle-bags."

That settles it! thought Sam Karnes.

He got up slowly, his mind picking up the scattered pieces of this puzzle, and fitting them together to make a picture. But when the picture was made, one piece was missing, and the sheriff did not like what he saw.

He shook his head.

"No," he said as if to himself. "It don't make sense. If it had been Miss Callie, she could have unloaded the money at her house. Then there wouldn't have been any reason for her hanging around the water hole, worrying about the weather. There wouldn't have been any reason for her to kill Joe Rankin. I can't figure—"

Betty Caldwell grabbed his arm. Lightning laid its dazzle on the trees, and the shadows leaped and fled into nothingness. A rumble of thunder began in the east and rolled through the sky.

And yonder toward the mesquite flat, where Betty pointed, the sheriff had an instantaneous glimpse of a man riding a bare-backed horse and carrying a spade on his shoulder!

Blackness swam across the motte in a tidal wave, engulfing everything, leaving only the lurid memory of that image lingering on the sheriff's retinas. His ears were ringing from the burst of thunder. He could hear nothing now, and the rider who carried a spade might have been an apparition, a ghost coming back here to finish Jud Caldwell's shallow grave.

The weirdness of all this brought gooseflesh raising on his arms, but his heart pounded exultantly. This was the end of the trail that had had so many false windings. The theory he had worked out there in the peace and quiet of the Hackberry jail was right, after all!

HE PUT down an impulse to hurry in the direction the rider was taking, toward the grave and the water hole. There was no hurry. In fact, Sam Karnes reminded himself, there would be heavy work to be done. The big, lazy sheriff had no liking for the weightier forms of manual labor.

"Who was it?" Betty whispered excitedly. "What would anybody be riding bare-back for, when there are so many saddles?"

The sheriff shook himself.

"I couldn't see his face. He had on a slicker, and his hat was pulled down. But I know why he's here, and the reason he ain't got a saddle is that he came out here in a wagon or something." He gripped Betty's arms to impress her with what he was going to say. "You stay put—understand? Stay right here, and keep down low. There might be a little lead flying around here!"

She nodded. Sam Karnes began moving a step at a time, feeling his way from tree to tree, straining his eyes against the almost impenetrable dark. Now, when he needed a glimmer of lightning to show him what the man was doing, it did not come.

He covered another few yards, then halted abruptly, listening to a horse blowing, and rolling a bit over his tongue.

The sound was close at hand. It came from directly under the tree that had shaded Jud Caldwell's killing. Sam Karnes knew that the mysterious rider had stopped there to reconnoiter as best he could in the darkness, to make certain nobody was around.

The sheriff held his breath, marveling that the sound his heart made against his ribs did not carry to the

rider's ears. After a little while, the horse moved on, and went straight down the steep bank of the draw. Loose earth made a little sliding sound there, then Sam Karnes heard the suction of mud, hock deep around the horse's hooves. After that, there was the cool, musical splash of water.

He grunted his satisfaction. Everything tied in, and so far there were no missing parts to the puzzle that was falling into place.

A small flash of lightning streaked the dark water with brilliance. He saw horse and rider in a black silhouette against the gleam, and saw that the man was riding straight across. Toward that fallen tree, and the spot where Jud Caldwell's boots had trampled the muddy ground, the spot where the sheriff had picked up those half-smoked cigarettes.

The splashing ceased. There was silence, then the scraping bite of the spade into the earth. Sam Karnes turned away from the tree, knowing that his quarry would be occupied for a little while. He walked out toward the mesquites, and it was so dark that he tripped over the shafts of the buggy where they slanted emptily to the ground, before he saw the vehicle.

He prowled around in search of a clue, but there was nothing to tell him who owned the buggy. Judge Parker had one about this new, but the livery stable kept several for hire.

Then he had to take cover in the chaparral. The bare-back rider was returning.

Once more the sheriff made himself wait. One trip wouldn't handle anything like six hundred pounds of silver dollars. It remained dark, and he heard the rider grunt and lower his burden into the back of the buggy. There was a chinking sound.

The horse turned back toward the water hole. Same Karnes came out of the thorny concealment, and felt the sack. It was burlap, an ordinary feed sack, and it weighed something over a hundred pounds.

Man without a saddle is kind of handicapped at carrying a load, the sheriff told himself. Let's see—about four trips. No use of me having to dig, or tote that money. Let him do the work."

He stayed hidden by the tree while the shadowy horseman completed two more journeys. The sheriff was grinning to himself, thinking that in the long run there was nothing to compare with waiting by a water hole to catch your man, and thinking about those cigarettes.

PRACTICALLY everybody but Miss Callie had rolled him a smoke while he had gone around with his arm in a sling. He had been proud of that trick—it was the nearest thing to actual detective work he had ever done.

But not one of the cigarettes matched the exact twist of those he had picked up across the water hole. Neither did the one Jud Caldwell had flung angrily against the wall of the jail that day.

The horse rattled his hocks, over yonder, and Sam Karnes straightened expectantly. This was the last trip. It was time to spring the trap.

A little wave of excitement passed through the sheriff's big body, and left him easy and cool. He listened to the splash of the horse's wading. There was a thin blade of lightning, slicing the sky; it showed the horse coming up the steep draw bank, looming large, but the animal's head concealed that of the rider.

The sheriff gathered his muscles for a spring that he never made. The brief illumination vanished, and the thunder was dying to a growling mutter in the western sky.

Somewhere behind and to his left, the flat crack of a gun punctuated the thunder, and a woman's voice was screaming!

"Aunt Callie! Don't! For heaven's sake, don't shoot! That's Sam Karnes by the tree!"

The bullet went past Sam's ear with a high, insistent whine, and fragments of bark from the live-oak stung his face, half-blinding him. He jumped sideward, and another shot ripped the night. The bullet struck where he had been. The horse snorted and shied to the side violently.

Sam Karnes leaped in the direction of that sound. His hand touched bridle reins, only to have them jerked out of his grasp, and that was the sack of money making a bright, musical jingle as it struck the ground near the sheriff's feet. Then gun flame leaped from the hand of the killer, so close Sam felt its hot blast against his cheek.

He forgot his two guns; he forgot everything but a desire to get his hands on this rider of the shadows. He grabbed wildly, and caught the man's foot. The gun roared again, but the horse was plunging wildly, and the shot went wide with a slap against the live-oak leaves.

Sam Karnes jerked with all his ponderous strength. Horse and rider came apart, and the man lurched hard against Sam's body, gasping as the impact knocked the breath out of him.

The six-shooter fell on the sheriff's boot. He kicked it aside, and toppled over on his prisoner, squeezing hard.

He heard Betty and Miss Callie come running through the darkness, and remembered Miss Callie's rifle.

"I've got him!" Sam called cautiously. "You can put away that squirrel gun, Miss Callie, before you hurt somebody. You nearly got me, while ago!"

Miss Callie came to a panting stop nearby.

"Brought it on yourself, Sam Karnes!" she said tartly. "If you'd got busy like this a week ago, instead of trying to be a friend to all mankind, lots of things wouldn't have happened. You could have caught him then!"

"Who is it, Sam?" Betty broke in on a frightened note.

The killer gasped, and went limp. Sam Karnes realized then that he had been exerting a little too much pressure in that bear hug. He shook the man, but there was no response.

"Blamed if I know!" Sam admitted. Then there was a flashback of memory, a swift and sure recollection of his grip around the man's ankle. He yelled, "Yes, I do, too, by golly!" and ran one big hand down the man's leg just to make sure.

No boot. A pair of high-topped shoes with buttons on them.

"Troy Holcomb!" the sheriff said.

THE bank official came alive just then, as if in answer to his name.

A Western Tragedy

ONE of the first prospectors to come to Silver Plume, a mining camp in Colorado, was a young Englishman from London. On the eve of his wedding in London, his beautiful fiance had been found dead. In an endeavor to forget her, he started prospecting. He struck it rich and became a very wealthy man.

He was not very sociable and no one intruded upon his privacy when he came home at night from his mine. Night after night the neighbors below in the valley would hear the sound of a hammer against rock.

He was an accomplished violinist and each night, before retiring, he would stand in front of his mountain cabin and play his violin. The music was carried down into the valley where the people in the mining camp gathered in small groups to listen.

One night after he had played better than usual, the people heard a shot. They rushed up the mountain side to his cabin and found his body. In the cabin was a note requesting that he be buried in the tomb he had been hammering out of the rocky mountain side all through the years.

—Edna Stewart

He struggled feebly in Sam's grasp.

"Turn loose of me!" he choked. "Let me up, Sam! I haven't done anything to be treated like this!"

"Nothing but three killings and a robbery," drawled the sheriff. "I figure you've kind of strained your credit, Troy. Know where you made your first mistake? You made it when you put on Jud Caldwell's boots, and walked across the mud. You ain't near as hefty as Jud was, Troy, and you didn't leave a deep enough track."

Troy Holcomb only moaned. The lightning came in a long, straggling brightness, and his face was as white as the collars he ordinarily wore.

"Anything you want to say, while we're still out here?" Sam asked gently.

"I—I was just trying to recover the money the killer buried!" Holcomb said. His voice grew strong again. "You let me up, Sam! I don't know who the killer was, but I found the money. Most of it's still there!"

"I figure that's where you're wrong," Sam corrected. "Somebody else found it first. You just dug up the heavy stuff. Ain't I right, Miss Callie?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Sheriff," she said stiffly.

Sam Karnes laughed.

"Well, I'll tell you when we get to town," he said, and yanked Troy Holcomb to his feet. "Betty, you and Miss Callie drive the buggy. I reckon my horse can carry double that far. Troy ain't a very big man."

XVIII

HOLCOMB looked even smaller in the gathering that jammed Sam's jail cell, days later. The sheriff had his own reasons for requesting a delay after he had locked the bank official in jail, and reported to Judge Parker, and turned the discomfited Bart Keyes loose. He wanted Tony and Mary there.

But he did not want to ride after Tony. It seemed like the strain of the past few days had tired him out. Besides, Tony was out of jail on a sort of parole as far as the sheriff was concerned. Sam Karnes insisted that Tony would come back of his own accord.

He was right. Tony came into town on horseback, with Mary riding proudly at his side. There was the old recklessness sitting the saddle with him, and a reminder of Jud Caldwell's arrogance in the way he walked after dismounting.

"Well, Sam," he said, "I reckon they can try me now. I got the cattle. I got two Clawhammer herds started up the trail, and I reckon they'll get there in time, whether I'm along or not!"

Sam Karnes grinned, clicked his whittling knife shut, and went out on the town to call the meeting.

They sat, now, in the cell where his pencil scribbling was still on the white plaster wall. Webster was there, an embarrassed look on his florid face, and Bart Keyes was fidgeting nervously with his mustache. Judge Parker bit a fresh chew of tobacco. Few Smith leaned his crutch against the bars, and watched Sam Karnes hopefully.

"Well," Sam began, "I reckon the county is going to be saved a lot of expense, and the services of high-priced people like district attorneys and Rangers. Troy says he's ready to confess. That right, Troy?"

Troy Holcomb nodded. He was sitting on the cot beside Tony Caldwell. He wore a clean collar again, and his buttoned shoes were polished.

"Before he does, though," Sam went on, "I figured you might want to know how I solved this case. Now, I've got a system. You take any crime, and you ask yourself four questions—why, how, when, and who. And sometimes one of them will answer the others. But this time it was kind of tough. Everybody naturally thought the killer had made Jud Caldwell dig that

grave and tote his coffin there, and that somebody had scared the killer away before he could bury Jud. I figured that way myself, except that I noticed Jud's pants were tucked inside his boots."

He paused, and looked at that list on the wall, and grinned at Ivy.

"A man don't dig with his pants inside his boots," he said. "And then Jud's boot tracks in the mud wasn't as deep as mine, although he weighed nearly as much as I do. I got to figuring that the killer had put on Jud's boots and walked over there to make that trail. I couldn't tie things together at first. Not until Troy told me about the money. Now if I had forty thousand dollars, and was sore at both banks, what would I do with it? I'd bury it. Jud figured to do the same thing. He had a couple of drinks here in town, and he got out on the road and got to thinking about the bulk and weight of the money, and wondering what he ought to cache it in. Then he thought of Miss Callie's coffin."

Miss Callie sniffed. Sam Karnes looked around over his audience, and ignored the sneer on Bart Keyes's face.

"Miss Callie's coffin," Sam went on, "was always a kind of joke to Jud, and he figured there was nothing like a coffin to bury anything in—even money. So he drove up to Miss Callie's house and got the coffin. He picked out a spot on a line between two trees, and took Miss Callie's spade, and began to dig.

"Now Troy"—the sheriff waved toward him— "had seen the fight with Tony. He had heard Tom Henry's threats. He knew about Jud trying to force the foreclosure on Wade Magill, and he saw Jud leave town with the money. Am I right, Troy?"

TROY HOLCOMB sighed, and nodded, looking down at his shoes.

"Well, Troy knew that if he went out there and cut the wire by the water hole, he'd have all the elements to make it look like a feud killing. Cutting the wire, he'd even ring Joe Rankin in on it. So he followed Jud, either watching him, or catching up with him later, when Jud was digging.

"He shot Jud Caldwell there in the moonlight, and I reckon Jud never knew what hit him. Then Troy put on Jud's boots—there ain't many of us here who can wear that small a size—and made the tracks, and smoked cigarettes over there to make it look like Jud had waited there trying to ambush somebody.

"I didn't know until the other night just how Troy handled the burying of the money. But I found out then. He carried it across the water hole on his horse, and put it in a spot where it was easy to dig, the spot he trampled down in Jud's boots. When he put the boots back on Jud, he got a little too neat—just like he always has been—and tucked Jud's pants inside. Like I told him, that was sure a big mistake."

"How about Tom Henry?" asked Few Smith. "He come in along there, somewhere!"

Sam nodded. "Tom was somewhere out in the brush, having a nap, about the time Jud was killed. He woke up, still pretty drunk, and started home. Just as he came out of the brush, Troy saw him and was afraid he'd been watching. Troy was mighty jumpy at that point. He took a shot at Tom, and Tom's horse lit out for home.

"Troy was through with the work, anyway. He rode on down to meet Joe Rankin's trail herd, but later he got to worrying about what Tom might have seen, and what he'd remember when he sobered up. What did you do then, Troy?"

"I came back up by the Rafter H that day, when the inquest was being held at the water hole," Holcomb said slowly. "I would have shot Tom then, I guess. But I couldn't find him. I found his gun there."

"That helps clear up what Tom Henry said about people coming

around and bothering him, while he was drunk," the sheriff said. "Well, then Troy used Tom's own gun to kill him with here in this cell, hoping to make it look like suicide. He came pretty near throwing us off the track, too, but then I got back on the idea of boots, and I knew Tom couldn't have worn Jud's boots.

"Now we come to Joe Rankin. Joe just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was camped close to the water hole, and he kept coming and going. About that time, Troy was getting worried about the weather."

"The weather?" asked the district attorney, startled.

"That's what I said. Weather. If it come to a good gully-washer and cow-chip floater of a rain, it could have washed that money down the draw and scattered it from here to Nueces. Troy went out a couple of times, after he thought it was safe to dig, and tried to recover the dinero. He got scared off both times. Know who that was, Troy?"

The killer shook his head in an unknowing manner.

"That was Miss Callie," Sam told him. "She was acting on the theory that a killer always comes back to the scene of his crime. But she saw you with a spade, and she saw you was looking at that spot. That's how come she dug there later, herself, and packed away the green backs and most of the gold."

"I got *all* the gold!" Miss Callie put in. "I gave it to Tony. It belonged to him, didn't it?"

"Well," Sam Karnes said hastily, "it looked like rain, and Troy got scared, and went out there again to dig. That time Joe Rankin blundered into him. He shot Joe, and had to get away in a hurry. He still hadn't got the money. I just about had things figured out then, except I still had two or three candidates for the killer—like Bart Keyes can tell you. I had to argue considerable with Bart before he'd let me go out there to work on the case."

SHERIFF KARNES paused and grinned at Keyes, and the Ranger flushed and dropped a cigarette he had just rolled. Sam Karnes picked it up.

"I reckon that's about all," he said. "You know the rest. But here's a damn funny thing. Look at this here cigarette!"

"What about it?" Keyes demanded surlily.

"Well, compare it with these others, here on the table. Now this is one Troy Holcomb rolled at the water hole, after he'd killed Jud, and here's another he rolled for me in jail. They ain't alike. But yours, Bart, is a dead ringer for them Troy made at the water hole! It beats me! It just goes to show you that some things don't prove anything—not at all!"

He opened the cell door then, and the crowd filed out, with Few Smith and Judge Parker slapping him on the shoulder, and the district attorney and Bart Keyes going off with a defeated air.

Tony and Mary were still sitting there on the cot, arms entwined around each other.

"Hey!" Sam Karnes called. "Come out of there, or I'll sure enough lock you up!"

He saw that they wouldn't have minded being locked in a cell of their own, and he saw Ivy smile at him as she started back to the kitchen. Something she was cooking smelled mighty good.

The sheriff went outside and tilted his chair in the shade. He reckoned there wouldn't be any need to get out and kill his horse, riding around the county after votes. If a man did his job, the votes came to him. He could sit right here and watch the square, and ride out to a water hole now and then.

That way, he could keep peace in Hackberry County.

"All right," said Little Yak, "I'll come down and tell you . . ."

South to the SUN

By WILLIAM HOPSON

A deputy matches his Colts against printer's ink!

ARBY came alive that morning in early September like so many other towns of its kind along the sweeping wastes of desert from Mexicali to Columbus; leisurely, undisturbed, facing another day that would be a scorcher. Ed Burton stepped out of the sheriff's office in the courthouse of red sandstone, fondling the blonde head of the little nine-year-old girl beside him.

"All right, Jenny, he said. "Tell Miss Teufel I'll be down after a bit.

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Soon's I saddle up."

He watched the child's departure toward the schoolhouse down through the greasewood and instinctively glanced first at the sun and again toward the south, thankful that four miles away an invisible line separated revolution and death from peace and life.

Over there in the Sonora hills rebel guns were booming answers to cannon and *ametralladoras*—machine guns—of the *Federalistas*, and Ed hoped that by now Little Yak was with Villa. Otherwise Little Yak would have to go back to the penitentiary at Florence for violation of his parole.

Jud Rodell came by, heading for Charley Brady's store across the square. "Howdy, Ed," he greeted.

"Morning, Jud. Going to work?"

"Soon as I get a sack of tobacco from Charley, and Hack opens up the office. We put the *Star* to press tonight."

Something invisible lay between them, a certain studied casulness of one friend toward another which both strove to hide. Jud was twenty-seven, four years the younger, and the thing had become a quiet, rising tide from those first evenings two months ago when the two of them had been sitting on Cora Teufel's front porch.

The friendship was still there and, Ed Burton knew, would grow stronger again after Jud married Cora. He had won, and of late had had the porch to himself. Unlike Jud, Burton hadn't been much of a hand with words; and the fact that he was the only man in Arby who still wore a gunbelt hadn't helped matters either, he guessed. Cora Teufel was two months out of Pennsylvania and had some pretty set ideas about a man who wore boots and a big six-shooter.

JUD went on and Ed Burton headed for the hotel livery to get his horse.

He saddled the roan and led him around the corner of the box-shaped hotel. He swung into leather as Hack Rodell, owner of the *Weekly Star*, came out on the porch, toothpick in mouth. Hack was seventy, burly, and believer in getting plenty of sleep even on press days. His mane of white hair was banged in front.

"Morning, Ed." He nodded, toothpick roaming from one corner of his mouth to the other. He removed it and spat. "Saw a light under your door pretty late last night. How you making out with the book?"

The book was something that only Hack Rodell knew about. It was supposed to teach a man how to write; and night after night old Hack, ragged bathrobe around his nude body, had come in to glance with critical eyes over the pages of foolscap, glasses down on his bulbous nose.

Once he'd said, "You sure aren't much on fancy style, Ed, but you got a knack of getting to the point. You're awkward and clumsy but you keep plowing through, just like you do as deputy sheriff."

Another time he'd remarked, "This fellow Conrad and some more weren't younkers when they started pushing a pencil, Ed. A lot more good men cut their teeth on newsp per type. If my nephew would dig in this way, I'd feel a lot better about the *Star* after I'm gone. Trouble with Jud is, his best words are used in talking."

"I'm coming along all right, I guess, Hack," Ed Burton said. "Well, got to be going."

"You wouldn't be heading over to pick up Little Yak now, would you?"

"Got to go down to the schoolhouse first," Burton grunted. "You know Mike Daniels? Toughest kid in school. Seems he chased little Rosita Carbajal around the school and into the girl's outhouse, trying to make her smoke a big cigar he swiped from his dad. Miss Teufel sent up one of the kids. I suppose I'm to scare him with my badge or something."

Hack grinned and flicked the tooth-

pick into the hard-packed dirt below the porch's level.

"Seems to me you ought to like that. Or are you just being heroic and keeping clear lately because Jud seems to have the inside track?"

Hack Rodell let go with a bull snort. Everybody in Arby knew about his bursts of temper over Jud's efforts at editing. People were saying the trouble with Hack was that he was getting along in years and was a little too cranky about the paper he'd founded and would one day leave to Jud's tender mercies.

"Maybe," Ed Burton said.

"You going by Brady's store?" Hack asked, descending the four steps. "Tell Jud to come over and let's get going. We're in a spot this week. Bo Anderson got drunk yesterday before he got the last of the ads set up and probably will be too shaky this morning to finish setting type. And Little Yak sure didn't help matters any when he threw that bed of type for the Spanish section right in the middle of the floor and stomped out, swearing he'd stick a knife in me."

The deputy reined around, edging the roan over a bit closer with an offside rowel.

"What was it all about anyhow, Hack?" he asked.

"Little Yak? Oh, you know what starts buzzing in these Mexican kid's heads every time a revolution comes along. Go across the line and join up. Be a soldier of fortune with Villa. So I tromped on him, and the hotheaded little Yaqui devil went on the prod. Swore he'd stick a knife in me."

"He's just mean enough to do it, too. I was always a little doubtful—dubious about helping you get him out on parole."

HACK shook his white mane—he never wore a hat—and smiled tolerantly.

"Ed, a lot of you lawmen are all alike. You never give any man the benefit of a doubt. I know he's tough. I know he was in three knife scrapes and manhandled a Mexican girl who wouldn't marry him. I know you had to send him up for cracking a man's head with a mesquite club at a dance. But what could you expect of a starving, half-Yaqui kid who's scorned by most of the other Mexicans all his life?

"I've watched him since he was a little barefooted, black-eyed kid stealing from Brady's store. I used to give him pennies and make him promise not to steal any more. So when you sent him up, I figured he needed a final break he never had before. We got him in here and I taught him to set type. Never saw anybody so fast. Nope, Ed, Yak won't stick any knife in me, I'm thinking. So you go down to the schoolhouse and then come back by the office to see if he cooled off and came back to work. If he hasn't, you and me'll go over to dobetown to his mother's—"

"If he hasn't," Burton cut in, he's probably across with Villa's men by now."

"If he hasn't," Burton cut in, "he's probably across with Villa's men by now."

"Possibly. See you later."

Burton reined over and rode toward Brady's store. Charley stood on the front porch, wizened, burned to the color of saddle leather by sun and desert winds, looking at two steel drums of gasoline which had been dumped off a broad-tired freight wagon. Now that a few automobiles had begun popping up in town, Charley was keeping abreast of the times.

"'Lo, Ed," he greeted. "Sheriff back from Dallas yet?"

"Still at the convention. Tell Jud that Hack wants him over at the office right away."

"He's inside. Going to make him give me a hand getting these barrels into the storeroom. Say, I got that saddle gun of your'n back from Philadelphia. Looks just like new now."

"Good. I'll pick it up later. How about ordering me a good thirty-eight with a shoulder holster?"

Charley Brady eyed the heavy pistol at Ed's corduroyed hip. "What's the matter with that old single-action forty-five?" he inquired.

"Too heavy. Not much need for it anyhow."

"Now you're getting some sense," Charley agreed. "Never could figure out why, even in the old days, a man would bother about weighing himself down with a sheath and belt full of cartridges. I'll get you one of them new Police models, four-inch barrel."

Jud Rodell came out of the store's front door and lit a freshly rolled cigarette, stuffing the hard sack into his shirt pocket. He was freshly shaved and handsome, short dark mustache close-clipped.

"You seen Little Yak yet, Ed?" he asked worriedly. "I suppose you know he quit yesterday and swore to stick a knife in Hack. I put a loaded thirty-thirty in the office last night, right beside Hack's desk. I'm worried, Ed."

"Hack isn't. Said for you to come on over."

"I will, soon's I give Charley a hand with these gasoline barrels."

"And"—Charley grinned—"not until you throw away that cigarette. I don't want to get blown all the way into Mexico."

The deputy rode on down through the greasewood, a frown putting a big wrinkle between his sandy eyebrows. He hoped General Francisco Villa would find himself with another recruit from north of the American line this morning. Little Yak hadn't been born to set Spanish type in a weekly newspaper office. Some day he'd break loose again with a knife or club, or perhaps a gun. Burton had been worried about it ever since, at Hack's insistence, they'd brought him from Florence on parole.

Recess was out when Ed Burton rode up. A group of youngsters, mostly dark-skinned, shrilled out a ball game on the dirt diamond. Another group, much smaller and in wide-eyed silence, stood woodenly near a corner of the building. Burton smiled as Cora Teufel strode past them.

SHE carried a long leather strap in one hand and, despite the look of determination on her pretty face, appeared about ready to cry. He cupped a hand to his ear, listening to muffled sounds of sobbing around the corner. The gesture set her face aflame.

"It took you a long time to get here," she said icily.

"If I'd known this was going to happen," he answered solemnly, "I wouldn't have been in such a hurry yesterday and the day before. If that's Mike around the corner, you've won. They'll toe the line from now on."

She dashed a hand to her eyes, as though trying to push back tears he mustn't see. A couple of times, sitting on her front porch evenings along with Jud, she had talked of what kindness and patience could do with even these little half-wild desert Mexicans. She seemed about to cry partly because the hiding of young Mike apparently was proving her theory wrong.

"I had to whip him," she said, biting her lips.

"I expect"—he nodded—"that since he gets about one a day at home, his mammy'll probably thank you for helping her with her housework."

She got a grip on herself. All of a sudden her lips were calm. She looked up at him, level-eyed.

"As an officer, you think that direct action and violence are the only ways to solve problems, don't you?" she asked quietly.

"All depends upon the circumstances, I reckon. The *revoltosos* who kicked Porfirio Diaz off his dictator's throne and into exile in Paris probably think so."

"That's different!" she flashed back at him angrily. "I'm concerned only

with these children. I spend hours a day trying to get out of their little minds some of these heroic ideas about bandits and cowboys and deputy sheriffs!"

"I'm glad," he answered coolly, "that you put the bandits before me."

A slight flush crept into her face. "I didn't mean it that way. But I asked you last night while Jud and I were having supper in the hotel, not to come here again wearing those boots and that big pistol. Just look at them all coming over! They want to wear boots and pack pistols like you do."

"The boot's heel keeps a man's foot from slipping through the stirrup when he gets thrown and maybe dragged or kicked to death," he explained. "I'm sorry about the gun, Cora. Habit, I guess. I could have put it in the saddlebag—"

A shot banged out, hard and flat on the morning air, three hundred yards away. The deputy turned in the saddle for a look. It had sounded like a rifle.

A man's voice shouted and Burton saw Jud Rodell running out of the *Star's* office toward Brady's store. He yelled at the deputy and waved behind him. Ed thought of Little Yak and felt his heart sink. He turned to Cora Teufel, lifting his reins.

"I'd better go and take a look. I don't think you'll have any more trouble handling things from now on."

"Of course you don't! Just use a strong right arm. Go on up and take care of your old trouble. Shoot somebody and become a hero to all these b-babies. Nobody in this town seems to care!"

He left her, spurring at a long lope across the school grounds and up through the greasewood. Charley Brady, Jud, and a man named Floyd Hogan were running. Ed Burton lengthened the roan's stride.

The three of them were in the office as the deputy swung down and went inside. They were bending over Hack. Hack sat relaxed in his swivel chair where he'd carried on the *Star's* business for forty years. His head lolled over to one side, the white bangs undisturbed. Blood and soaked powder burns covered the front of his white shirt with its black string tie.

"Little Yak?" Ed asked.

Charley Brady straightened and nodded, his eyes agate. "I guess so. Ed, if you ever had any ideas about running for sheriff, don't do it now. People will never forget it was you helped poor old Hack get that dirty little thieving rat out on parole."

BO ANDERSON came in through the frame building's rear door, a thin, stooped man in his fifties. His eyes were weak, bloodshot, his ink-stained hands indicating that he hadn't been home all night.

"Great catfish!" he exclaimed, then confirmed, "it was Little Yak all right. I was coming across from 'dobietown just now and he run right past me with a rifle in his hands. He was sure going lickety-split for home."

The office was filling up. Jim Byrd, who ran the local hardware store and acted as undertaker, pushed through the crowd. Burton spoke curtly to him about Hack, then went out on the false-fronted building's porch. Jud Rodell was leaning against a support, hand over his eyes.

"I warned Hack but he wouldn't listen," Jud moaned.

"Charley," the deputy called to Brady still inside, "grab your horse from back of the store. Floyd, you've got your horse. You coming, Jud?"

Jud straightened, blowing his nose. "I was almost in the office when the shot came and I ran in to find Hack with powder burns still on the front of his shirt. Yes, I'll come, Ed. And I hope I get just one shot at him with that gun I left in the office last night for Hack to protect himself with."

They were mounted and on the move within a surprisingly short time, drumming over into 'dobietown. Hoof-

beats threw up dust in the hard-packed street as they loped past a small 'dobe house with an empty corral out back. In the doorway of the 'dobe a blank-faced woman stood watching. Little Yak's Indian mother; a *Yaqui Mansito*—a tame Yaqui who had married, or lived with, Little Yak's Mexican father, now across the Border with some of the *revoltosos*.

Maybe, the deputy thought, the fugitive had wasted precious minutes at home before hitting out. The line was but four miles or so away. He found strange thoughts scuddling across his mind like clouds driven before the wind. "You're awkward and clumsy but you drive straight through," Hack had said. "Trouble with Jud is his best words are used to convince Cora he loves her." And Charley Brady. "If you ever had any ideas about running for sheriff forget 'em." "You think that direct action and violence are the only ways to solve problems, don't you?" That from Cora.

They drove harder into the desert, the houses of 'dobetown falling behind. The limbs of the greasewood made sharp *thrishing* sounds, slapping at the horses and the legs of their four riders. Heat waves had begun to do devil dances out ahead of them across the sand. A scorcher, all right.

The sand began to turn color, changing to black lava upthrusts on the flat floor of the waterless land. Vegetation fell away. They were amid little rocks which, during summer, became so hot that running a horse or wild cow through them brought the smell of burning hooves.

Ed's hunch proved right. He was off to one side fifty yards; Charley to the left, watching for new tracks. Ed waved and the others closed in. Little Yak had hit into the lava bed, the Indian cunning of his forefathers telling him that pursuers would lose plenty of time trying to follow his trail in there. And time, just a few spare minutes, was all he needed to get across that invisible line to sanctuary in the Sonora Desert.

But the rocks proved to be the undoing of Little Yak. He had gone through too fast and sprung a tendon on his running horse. They saw it now, a mile ahead, limping badly.

"Slow down, boys!" yelled Charley Brady, hat brim back in his face. "Hold up a little till we get through or we'll lose him. Don't cripple a good horse!"

Ed Burton ignored the cry and drove on through. He saw the ground ahead of the fugitive, sloping upward now toward another black burst of lava clusters. Here the earth had erupted more violently in a bygone age. Some of the rocks were ten feet high. Once among them, Little Yak might slip away on foot.

Wind like the blast from a furnace struck their lips and dried them to tongue-licking cracks. Sweat dampened the laboring horses' necks and flanks and swiftly turned to little fluffs of dirty yellow lather. Saddle leather creaked.

FOUR hundred yards from where Little Yak's badly limping horse disappeared back of a high upthrust, the men split. Hogan drove hard to the right and ahead. Charley Brady went left, still fighting his hat brim. They would circle and cut off the fugitive from the other side.

Ed and Jud Rodell slowed to a trot, halted their heaving mounts long enough for the other two to get around, then moved forward at a walk. Two hundred yards from the rocks a shot rang out and a geyser of dust jumped up off the desert slope close by. The two men hurriedly dismounted and sought cover.

Little Yak was cornered.

They fought it out for more than two hours that mid-day in white sunshine that quickly became a burning hell, while Little Yak shrieked oaths and jeers at Ed Burton's thirst-hoarsened pleas to come down with

his hands up in surrender, that he would receive a fair trial. The deputy had been certain from the beginning that he was wasting his time. Little Yak knew too well that, regardless of the outcome of the trial, he would go back to the penitentiary at Florence for four more years.

He ducked from rock to rock, throwing wild shots from what appeared to be an inexhaustible supply of ammunition.

"He's sure got plenty of shells, Ed," Jud called from prone position back of a rock fifty yards to the right. "Must have figured he couldn't get any in Mexico for that wornout Spencer carbine he's using."

"It's a lucky thing for all of us he's using a worn-out Spencer, too!" Burton called back. "I can hear those fifty-six-caliber five-hundred-grainers tumbling end over end before they come a hundred yards."

Word of the fight not more than two and a half miles south of town had spread like leaves thrown before a high wind. By high noon, several buggies, wagons, one automobile with rod-braced front fenders and acetylene headlights, plus numerous saddled horses, had collected down the slope among a few yuccas. People gathered in little knots under the blazing sun to watch; with hands shading their eyes. Ed Burton thought of the canteen he always carried on his saddle and cursed with a dry, cracked tongue.

He muttered another under-breath oath at sight of Cora Teufel among the crowd, though he thought he knew why. Every young school kid in Arby was there. How they had made it, many of them barefooted, across two and a half miles of sand so hot it burned a man's foot through his boot sole, Ed Burton couldn't comprehend.

He turned his attention to the cornered man again, making a final hoarse plea for him to come down.

To his surprise, Little Yak suddenly agreed. "All right, Ed!" he shrilled, stepping into view with hands in the air, swarthy Indian face black under the hat brim. "Can't go without water any longer. I'll come down and tell you how it happened if you'll promise not to let them people—"

He spun around and plunged limply from sight once more and the deputy wheeled toward Jud Rodell. Jud was rising to his feet now, jacking the hot, empty shell from the 30-30.

"That did it, Ed," he called. "Right through the neck at a hundred yards. Never thought that cagey little devil would be took in by such a kid trick."

Ed Burton got to his feet, brushing sand from his corduroys, his sun-cracked lips thin with a sudden fury. No matter what Little Yak had done, that last shot had been plain murder. He holstered his six-shooter and looked down the slope, wondering if Cora had seen.

Jud was sprinting upward through the sand, Winchester cocked and halfway to shoulder in readiness, should there be need for more. Burton started after him. His eyeballs ached from squinting through the glare of that hellish sun and he felt a little tired, now that it was over. Maybe it was best this way. Little Yak hadn't been meant to stay behind bars or swing from a hangman's scaffold.

People were streaming up from among the yuccas, twenty of Cora's young pupils in the lead, racing to get there first. Burton mopped a sleeve across his sweaty forehead, thinking of Little Yak's mother. He'd have to go back to town and tell her, though she probably knew by now. She must have known, standing stolid-faced in the doorway of the hut and watching those who had hurried past toward the battle site.

JUD was standing over the body when Burton arrived. Little Yak lay with the sun in his face, his neck all bloody and twisted at a queer angle, facing south. It was as though he

had, in that last moment when the bullet struck, turned for a final look toward the land of his forefathers, where the guns of the *revoltosos* were on the march. South to the sun.

In a matter of minutes, more than fifty people were there, standing in a tightly packed circle, bobbing up on toes and peering.

Charley Brady was on his way down to one of the wagons where a man said he had part of an old tarpaulin. Charley came back with the tarp and Ed's saddle canteen. Burton partly assuaged his thirst with a few small swallows, then went toward where Little Yak's crippled horse stood some distance away, left rear hoof barely touching the ground.

Footsteps sounded behind and he waited for Cora to come up. Her face was flushed, agitated.

"Just offhand," he observed, smiling at her, "I'd say that school is out for the day."

"Out!" She turned to point. "Look at them! Eyes as big as saucers, chattering like monkeys and fighting over the empty cartridges. They'll be doing their own version of this terrible thing for the next month!"

"Is that why you came out? Or was it—"

"Morbid curiosity?" she flashed at him. "Heaven forbid! I came in a borrowed buggy to try and get these children back to town before this ghastly thing happened."

They were at the horse now. It stood dejectedly, head low, blood caked in the hair along its sides where Little Yak's cruel spurs had driven it limpingly on. He raised a stirrup, hooked it over the saddle-horn, and began uncinching.

"It couldn't be helped," he said. "But I'm not sure you belong out here, Cora, thinking some of the things you do. I never got around to asking you why you came here."

"To Arby? Because my parents were killed by two men fleeing a bank robbery who needed our secluded farm as a hideout for a few days. They were caught and executed. I had to get far away—some place. I resigned my school and came here. Out where the sun is."

She watched as he dumped saddle and sweaty blanket on the ground, unlatched the bridle's throat latch and removed the bit. He gave the horse a slap on the rump. It would, he knew, make its slow way straight back to the empty corral in 'dobetown where the dark-faced woman now lived alone.

"So you're thinking I'll leave now?" she challenged.

"I don't know," he said. "The desert is a strange place. It's no place for the weak, but it's a good place for those strong enough to conquer it. It doesn't compromise."

"And you think I'm weak?"

"Jud just killed a man, Cora," he answered, wondering what she thought.

"I suppose you're one of the strong ones," she commented icily.

He shook his head. He was becoming a little angry at this woman.

"I don't know. But I've got to arrest Jud Rodell. On a technical charge of murder."

"I see," she said, plainly angry herself. "You'd arrest your best friend for taking revenge upon a man who might have, even in surrender, been up to some trick."

"That's for the district attorney to decide," he answered doggedly, stooping for bridle and saddle. He slung the saddle over his shoulder. "Jud shot a man who was technically already in custody."

"Last night," she said, "Jud again asked me to marry him."

"And?"

"Would it make any difference to you?"

"If you mean about his arrest—no, Cora. He'll go free, of course. No jury would ever convict him. People liked old Hack too much. But it still doesn't make any difference."

"I knew it wouldn't," she cried, almost triumphantly. "But I'm loyal to someone like Jud in trouble. And I can be strong, too. I'm going to marry him."

HE WALKED in silence beside her as they went back. Charley and Floyd Hogan and two other men had the weighted tarp by its four corners and were starting down the slope toward the wagons, followed by the crowd.

"Anyhow," Charley remarked to nobody in particular, shifting his grip, "my store'll show a little more profit from now on."

Jud was down at the wagon when the four men loaded in the sagging tarpaulin. He stood by a rear wheel, Winchester in hand, surrounded by a dozen of Cora's pupils.

"Well, Ed," he grunted, "I wonder what Uncle Hack would say now if he could talk to the fellow you and him got paroled out of prison against the advice of every man in town. This isn't going to set well with people."

Burton shrugged noncommittally and drank from his canteen again. He replaced it and lifted the reins past the roan's mane, swinging up. Cora had shot him one quick look of surprise at Jud's words and then gone to her borrowed buggy. She was loading it to the gunwales with scrambling recalcitrants. She beckoned over the head of a dark-skinned urchin wearing beribboned pigtails and Burton rode over.

"Why didn't you tell me that you helped Mr. Rodell get him out on parole?" she asked quietly.

"Would it have made any difference?" he asked her. "I'm a lawman."

Maybe he shouldn't have said it, he thought. But in her fierce desire to set her young charges on the road to a better life Cora Teufel had seen him only as a man who wore a big pistol and was, therefore, a menace because all the kids liked him.

The procession got under way. The sun had cooled a trifle by the time they came back through 'dobetown, heading for the hardware store where, in the rear, Hack had been laid out. Jud rode beside Ed Burton, silent for several minutes now.

"This is going to be tough on Cora, Ed," he finally remarked. "She hates this kind of thing."

"Most people do, Jud," Burton said. "We'll phone the district attorney after the inquest and get you free on bail until he can get over for a hearing." Jud hadn't said much about the arrest.

"All right. Where you going?"

Ed had reined off to one side. "To tell Little Yak's mother."

"She knows," Jud Rodell said with sudden harshness. "There she stands in the doorway. Come on and get the inquest over with first."

"I'll tell her first."

Cora called from the buggy, "Ed, would it do any good if I came down here after while?"

He shook his head and swung the roan toward the hut where Little Yak had lived. He reined up in front of the house and swung down. Eyes that were black, opaque, dry, stared at him.

"*Buenos tardes, senora,*" he greeted in Spanish, touching the brim of his hat.

Still she didn't move or speak. He stood awkwardly. She believed he had killed her son, and he thought vaguely that he'd have to get the county to supply her with a few groceries each month, now that Little Yak was gone.

"What do you want?" she finally demanded. Her Spanish was broken, harsh, Yaqui. Few of the Yaquis, even the *Mansitos*, had ever learned to speak good Spanish.

"I have come to talk about your son," he answered.

She stood a few moments more, staring at him hostilely, at the badge on his dusty shirt front. Then she stepped aside in gesture for him to

enter. He had been in the place before, when he and Hack had brought Little Yak from the penitentiary.

The floor of concrete—probably stolen from Byrd's hardware store—was the same, neither clean nor dirty. She motioned for him to sit in a rawhide chair with a nod of her head.

ED BEGAN by telling her in fluent Spanish that Little Yak had been a bad young hombre who had been sent to the penitentiary for trying to kill another *joven*. When he moved on to Hack Rodell and himself, bringing her son home to his mother so that he could work and live in her house and not fight any more, some kind of life began to appear in her eyes. The head with its coarse black hair began to nod.

"And then," he continued, turning his hat on his crossed knee, "yesterday your son became very angry at his good friend, the Señor Rodell. He threatened to kill him and then go off to the revolution. This morning he took his rifle and went to the office of the Señor Rodell and shot him."

"No, no, no!" burst from her.

And then the dam broke. A flood of words began to pour from her lips. True, Little Yak was angry last evening. He had sat all night and talked about his parole to the good señor and about the revolution. This morning he had been going to fight with the *revoltosos* when a man had come, wanting to hire him to kill his patron. But Little Yak had been frightened and had gone to warn his patron, carrying his rifle for protection.

He had told the good Señor Rodell how Jud Rodell wanted him dead. He had stood out behind the building and watched as the nephew had come in and been accused of being a Judas. He had seen the Señor Jud grab up a rifle in the office and kill his uncle. Why had he not run to *Diputado* Burton? Because he had quit his job in anger and would be sent back to the penitentiary.

Ed Burton sat there, leaning forward to get it all from her garbled sentences and poor pronunciation. When it was over he got up and put on his hat. She followed him to the door.

"And now you will kill man who murdered my son, Señor *Diputado*? You will do away with this wicked one?"

He shook off her clutching hand and reached for the dangling reins beneath the roan's blue chin. Jud must have been mad, he kept thinking. He'd either wanted the paper for himself, now that he believed Cora would marry him, or most likely Hack's quarrels over his poor work on the *Star* had inflamed him to murder lust. He'd known Little Yak was leaving to cross the line that morning, and had gone down to take advantage of Little Yak's anger while it was still hot. No wonder old Hack, white with anger as his nephew had come from Brady's, had called him a Judas.

A lot of things were clear now. Jud running toward Brady's almost with the sound of the shot. Jud knowing Little Yak had but a moment before left the office but still not going after him, knowing he was armed. Jud killing Little Yak before he could come down to talk. Jud getting harsh at Ed for stopping to see Little Yak's mother, saying to wait until the inquest was over.

Ed Burton had come into the street near the hardware store. There was a crowd out front, but not Jud's horse. The deputy suddenly reined around and touched steel into his roan's sides. He slashed the long ends of the reins into the animal's flanks and went back down the road into 'dobetown at a run.

Jud's horse was there at Little Yak's. So was Jud Rodell, inside, strangling with long fingers a woman who fought silently on the bed for her life.

Ed said, "Jud, you're too late," and slid the heavy six-shooter from its sheath.

"Damn you, oh, damn you, Ed!" choked out Jud Rodell and leaped at him.

The .45's ear-splitting roar seemed to split the walls instead. The force of the bullet against Jud Rodell's shin knocked him back against the wall, where he grabbed at a pistol hanging in a sheath. He fell, twisting.

"It's no use, Jud!" Ed cried.

He shot Jud Rodell through the shoulder and then was on him, swinging the long barrel of the single-action gun down in a thudding blow on Jud's head. Out in the street a shrill-voiced urchin began to run screaming toward him, and in fifteen minutes Charley and the others began to arrive.

CHARLEY BRADY was first in. He saw the man with the blood-stained bandages and asked a question.

Tersely Ed told him all.

The sun was almost down by the time everything was finished. No, not quite everything. There was movement in the *Star* office where Bo Anderson was at work.

Ed Burton moved toward his office. Bare feet gave off soft padding sounds, as several of Cora's pupils came to meet him.

The girl Jenny closed in beside him, half shyly. He placed a big hand fondly on her head.

"Why aren't you home for supper?" he asked, smiling down.

"We was waiting for you to come out of the store again," Mike Daniels put in. "Where you going now, Ed?"

"Over to the *Star*. Got to give Bo a hand getting out the paper tonight."

"Can we go in with you?"

"Sure, Mike. But we'll put you all to work. Bo's short of help."

He moved on toward the office, Jenny's hand resting in his.

Bo Anderson looked up from Hack's desk and rose as they came in.

"I got everything all written up, Ed," he said, "except the editorial. Hack always put that off until the last minute. Said he could write better that way. I've been trying to think of something to say but ain't had much luck. How about you giving it a whirl while I finish setting type? We'll have to hustle to make it by morning."

"I've brought you some help." Ed smiled, nodding at the group. "Put 'em to work."

Hack's green eyeshade lay on the desk and Ed put it on, adjusting the light, for it was getting dark in the office. Straight and to the point, Hack had said. He began to write:

> Today in Arby two men died. One was a good man. The other might have been a good man if the chance had come his way a little earlier in life—

Somebody came up behind and he thought it was Bo, waiting for the copy, until he felt her hand on his shoulder. She was smiling gently at the new picture he made.

"You've heard?" he asked.

She nodded. "Just a moment ago, on the way up here to see if I could be of any help. I was hoping to find Jud here to tell him that after today, up there among the rocks, things couldn't be the same. Now I won't need to."

"No," he said, almost absently, "you won't need to now, Cora."

He felt Cora's gentle nearness close to him as she bent down over his big shoulder and read the pages of foolscap with a slowly changing expression. She straightened, a kind of strange wonder dawning in her eyes.

"It's the kind of thing Hack Rodell would have written. You belong in that chair, Ed. It fits you like it fitted him. From it can come the thoughts meant for people you know so well, like Hack knew them."

"I might be able to say a few to you some day," he answered.

"You can say them now," she said.

He sent Jenny over to help Bo Anderson and said them straight and to the point. ● ● ●

"Stand back, yo' coal-heavin' sons of hell . . ."

MEDICO OF GUN-FLAME BASIN

A Novelet by LARRY A. HARRIS

Doc Cameron writes a kill-or-cure prescription when an epidemic of lead poisoning breaks out in Cochita

I

YOUNG Doc Cameron rode out of Cochita town just after dark. A chill rain was blowing out of the north, seeping through his leaky slicker. The wet wind moaned, beating against his bent figure, as it swept down off the pine-timbered hills. A jagged streak of lightning split the inky heavens.

As Cameron neared the foothills he topped a rise, to see the lighted windows of his father's ranch house. A faint smile touched his lips—he was remembering the last time he'd ridden out here. Old Bronc Cameron had never been a man to mince words.

"Get to hell out of here!" he'd shouted angrily.

Doc Cameron reckoned the same tongue-lashing was in store for him

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now. He rode past the corrals, eyes probing the familiar outbuildings. The same smell came from the barns. Yet, with a bitter pang, Cameron realized that much had changed recently. The sagging gates and roofs told of poverty and neglect.

He was glad none of the Slash C men heard him ride up. In the front yard he reined in, dismounted. He strode upon the sheltered porch, opened the door without knocking. There he paused, a strapping, wide-shouldered young gent with level blue eyes.

A gust of wet wind made the lamp sputter. Old Bronc Cameron was sitting in a chair before the fireplace, his back to the door. Before he could turn, his medico son said:

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"Howdy, Dad."

Old Bronc's body stiffened. He rose to his full height, a rugged, steel-framed oldster with great mauling fists, gray hair, and eyes to match. Surprise and anger showed in his startled gaze.

"Now, what in—"

"Just a minute, Dad." Cameron closed the door, strode to the center of the room. "I'm not here to plead my own case. I'm here to tell you that you're plunging yourself and the other shirt-tail ranchers into a war that'll mean ruin!"

"Ruin!" echoed the Old Bronc hotly. "As if we're not already on the verge of ruin!"

Young Cameron had no chance to get a word in then. Old Bronc was bellowing, his heavy-jowled face working with rage. All his life he had talked and others had listened. As leader of the smaller ranchers in Gun-Flame Basin his word was law. He had fought and slaved to make the Slash C a great ranch.

AT ONE time his dream had been to see young Bob take over the mantle of leadership in this great cow country. When that dream had been smashed, something had happened to Old Bronc Cameron.

"We've been over this before, Bob. When you begun associating with Thayer, falling for the wiles of that gal of his—"

"Leave Jean's name out of this, Dad!" Cameron cut in, his temper flaming. "Thayer made you a good offer for the coal on your land, and you wouldn't take it. Here is your one chance to pull out of debt, move farther back into the hills with your cows. According to Lane Thayer, the seam of coal he's working goes heavily into our land. It's better grade than they're mining up around Gallup. Why don't you open your eyes to facts, Dad?"

"Who sent you with this purty talk, Bob? Thayer?"

"No one, Dad. Today at dawn one of your guards killed a miner in cold blood. Those miners won't forget that. You've fired all the old hands and hired gunmen. You're letting Chris Haddock lead you around by the nose—"

"Haddock is at least a fighter!" Old Bronc roared. "That's more than I can say for you. He's got sense enough to know what's happening. Thayer got that land for a song and began mining. Now he's laughing up his sleeve at us. Damn his sneaking soul, he's responsible for turning Cochita into a hell-town! His damned furriners stealing our beeves, butchering them on the spot. He's ruined this country, hear me?

"On top of that, he wants us to sell and get out! By God, I'll die before I sell! Coal? Cuss the black stuff. I'll lose the Slash C to the bank before I give in. This is cow country. We're cowmen, not miners! And so long as there's life in my body, that's how it'll be. Now get out!'

Doc Cameron suddenly realized the utter futility of his mission here tonight. Hate had poisoned Old Bronc.

"Hear me, Bob? Get out!"

Without another word, Bob Cammeron turned and walked outside. He heard Old Bronc slam the door at his back. He was about to mount when the hulking figure of a man darted out of the porch shadows to his side. The man's eyes were rolling whitely.

"I heard what you-all said, Doctuh Bob. A wants yo' to know I is mighty sorry. Mistuh Bronc ain't hisself no mo'."

Cameron grinned faintly at the big Negro facing him. Black Sam was as much a part of the Slash C as the house itself. From his big flat feet to the top of his kinky head he was all brawn and muscle.

"Trouble's goin' to bust loose Doctuh Bob," he croaked. "I feel it."

"That's what I'm afraid of, Sam. But remember—whatever happens, I

want you to look out for Dad."

Black Sam said he would. Cameron mounted and rode out of the yard. On the road back toward town, he struck out at an easy lope, barely conscious of the chill rain. A mile from town he topped one of the wooded hills.

This was still Slash C land. On the other side of the hill was Lane Thayer's Chica Negra Coal Mines. Somewhere in the timber to his right Cameron knew his father and the other basin cowmen posted gun-riders.

To avoid them Cameron dipped down into a ravine. Piñon bushes scraped at his legs. He rode cautiously, eyes stabbing the rainy darkness about his. On the brink of a hill he stopped. Below him lay the mine, a scatteration of clapboard buildings perched on the side of the hill.

Light glowed at the windows of the mine office. Men moved about with bobbing lanterns near the shaft. In the gully beyond glimmered the lights of Shanty Town.

With the muted undertone from the mine strumming at his nerves, Cameron rode closer. He was within two hundred yards of the mine shaft when a figure rose up out of the brush ahead of him.

A MAN'S voice rasped, "Stop there, mister! Make a funny move, and I'll sure enough drop you. Who are you?"

"Doc Cameron."

The man eased nearer. "What you want, Doc?"

"Came to see Lane Thayer."

Grumbling, the guard lowered his rifle. "Orders was to let nobody pass, Doc," he growled. "Reckon you can go on, though. They're in the office."

Cameron wheeled up in front of the rain-soaked clapboard building that housed Lane Thayer's office. The mine owner met him at the door. Thayer's greeting was warm. There was a quality of frankness about this quiet-spoken, firm-jawed mining man that had appealed to Cameron. Lane Thayer was a strong-willed man who knew miners and men. His whole heart and soul were wrapped up in his Chica Negra Mine—and his daughter Jean.

"Come in out of the rain, Doc," he said softly.

Despite the mine owner's smile, Cameron sensed the worry that was roweling the man. As they stepped inside the office, a big, thick-chested fellow in flannel shirt, whipcord breeches and muddy laced boots got up from behind a desk. His beady black eyes lanced Cameron with open unfriendliness. He barely nodded, reached for his slicker and hat, and strode to the door, telling Thayer he was going into the shaft.

When Thayer and Cameron were alone the mine owner said, "You and Tod Sutcliffe don't hit it off, do you, Doc?"

"I hold nothing against Sutcliffe, Lane."

"I'm sorry it's that way, Doc. Sutcliffe is one of the best geologists and foremen in the game. He drinks too much, I know, but he's a good man. What's on your mind, Doc? Did you talk to your dad again?"

Bitterly Cameron nodded. "It's no use, Lane. Dad's dead set against selling or accepting any royalty proposition. I can't savvy it. Chris Haddock is siding him. It's the first time I ever knew Haddock to turn down a chance to make a dollar. The other smaller ranchers are listening to them. I'm sorry, Lane."

"Every earthly thing I own is tied up in this mine, Doc," Lane Thayer said grimly. "I don't aim to lose it. I'm just starting to make money. It's Jean I'm thinking of. I want her to have plenty. It pleased me mightily when she began wearing your ring. If anything happens to me, Doc, I want you always to care for her.

"This morning at dawn one of our

miners was killed. We've guards up now—ready to fight. God knows I don't want to fight your people, but if there is no other way, then it'll be war! This is my land, bought and paid for. There's a wealth of coal on your father's land—in all of Gun-Flame Basin, in fact. Those cowmen that are starving now could be made wealthy in a year if they'd listen to reason.

"They say the Shanty Town miners are stealing their beef. They're not, Doc. Don't know whether you know it or not, but the cowmen are meeting at your dad's ranch tonight. I've sent Banker Jeff McVay out to reason with them once more. Every one of them is mortgaged to the hilt to him. If they turn down my proposition again, they they can go to hell!"

More than ever, Doc Cameron realized the hopelessness of ever effecting a truce between Thayer and the cowmen. When he left, he circled Shanty Town, heading through the brush of the foothills toward Cochita.

He had almost reached the edge of town when he saw a shadow move in the brush ahead of him. He saw the flash of a gun. Then searing, blinding shock poured through him. Desperately he grabbed at the kak horn as his horse reared. But his strength was gone. The black rainy night closed in on him. He struck the muddy ground, oblivion claiming him.

II

THUNDER rumbled faintly over the night-blackened Pintada Hills. The muted sounds of activity from Thayer's mine blended with the guttural growl of Cochita town. Drizzling rain continued to fall, soaking the brooding rangeland.

Sick, afire with pain, Doc Cameron roused. For a full minute he lay still, groggily recalling all that had happaned. Rain had soaked his clothes. Biting back a groan, he sat up, wiping the blood smear from his face. Probing fingers told him the bushwhacker's bullet had cut a deep furrow across his temple.

Pulling himself to his feet, he picked up his hat that lay on the ground nearby. Misery poured through him as he trudged toward the lights of the town. He came upon his horse, standing in a brushy thicket. Reeling a little, he gathered up the reins and mounted.

He had intended to go into Cochita to see Jean Thayer but now he hesitated. How long he had lain here in the brush unconscious he had no idea. Obviously the bushwhacker had left him for dead. But who would try to kill him? And why?

"We'll ease back to the mine and take a look-see anyhow, bronc," he muttered.

He rode cautiously over the back trail. Memories dogged him, filling him with bitterness. There had never been the understanding between his father and himself that might have been. Six years ago, when he had told the oldster he wanted to go East to study medicine, Old Bronc had exploded.

"All right, Bob!" he had cried scornfully. "Be a damn small-town medico if that's what you want. Anybody can be a pill peddler, but it takes a big man to rod a spread like the Slash C."

Bob Cameron had throttled the fierce rebellion inside him. He had worked his way through medical school, but an urge to return to Cochita and set up his office there had filled him when his schooling was over. This section of northern New Mexico was home to him. He still had hopes of making Old Bronc proud of him.

He had arrived in Cochita a week after Thayer's mine had begun producing. Almost overnight, the cowtown of Cochita had been transformed into a boom camp. Shanty Town sprang up on the outskirts, a squalid

settlement of plank shacks. Italians and Mexicans drifted in, seeking work. Night-life girls, gamblers, freighters, and miners gave their patronage to blaring saloons.

The cowmen, hard hit from a siege of blackleg, borrowed money to keep going. With all the savage resentment cowmen hold for intruders, they had fought Thayer. They'd sworn that they'd starve before their pastures were turned into a coal field. And skinny, frightened Sheriff Tom Andrews had thrown up his hands in despair.

The first time Doc Cameron met Jean Thayer, he had known she meant more to him than anything else in the world. In this dark-eyed spirited girl were all the fine qualities a man could ask for. When she accepted his ring, they both held hopes for peace.

"Things will work out all right," he had told her.

"I'm afraid they won't, Bob," she had said just last night. "I'm afraid."

Now, as Cameron drew near the mine, he stopped in a clump of trees. Shielded kerosene flares lit the mouth of the shaft. The hiss and roar of a

steam boiler near the pit, the creak and groan of steel cables on the windlass, throbbed through the night. Near the shaft-engine, the operator got his signal. A loaded hutch was hoisted to the surface. Men with bobbing lanterns immediately hooked a burro to it, drew the car off, and the cage was lowered again.

Cameron saw Tod Sutcliffe emerge from the shaft with the next load. Sutcliffe bawled a profane order to the workmen, then strode quickly to the office.

Cameron turned from his covert back toward town. By the activity along the street he knew it was still early. Lamplight gleamed from the store windows. Slicker-clad miners and the nondescript element of a boomtown moved in a seething tide along the plank walks.

FREIGHT wagons creaked through the muddy street, drawn by straining mules. Mule-skinners' shouts added to the confusion. The shrill blast of a switch engine lanced through the murk. Beyond Shanty Town the shriek of a steam whistle at the Chica Negra Mine told of a change of shifts.

In his office, Cameron dressed and bandaged the bullet gash across his head. Quickly he changed into dry clothes, then went back down to the street. An urge to see Jean sent him striding along the crowded walk.

As he passed through shafts of light, some of the miners spoke to him in their broken English. The plight of these men touched Cameron deeply. He could readily understand the fierce resentment the cowmen felt toward them, yet they were a people striving to live, violent in their hates and loves, preys to the vice offered them. In all fairness, Cameron had doctored them. And in doing so he had won the scorn of his own clan—the cowmen.

Near the center of town Cameron turned in at the boarding-house where Jean and her father lived. Jean met him at the front door. Her glad cry broke off when she saw the bandage about his head.

"Bob—what's happened?"

"Nothing much."

They went into the parlor. There Cameron kissed her, trying to shake off the misery that plagued him. Jean drew back, paling, her dark eyes searching his very soul.

"Tell me, Bob," she said anxiously.

Cameron forced a grin he didn't feel.

"Somebody in the basin is not a very good shot, Jean."

"Who did it?"

Cameron sobered. "I don't know, honey. That's what I aim to find out."

Briefly he told her then of his calls tonight, of the shot that had grazed his head.

"Bob, have you seen Chris Haddock lately?"

"Not for a day or two. We didn't speak then."

All the torment and worry a woman can know flooded Jean's eyes as she clung to Cameron. Dressed in whipcord riding breeches and boots, she looked childishly small, yet every fiber of her lovely curved body breathed of strength.

"Bob, I want you to be careful. Chris Haddock hates you. He's done everything he can to turn your father and the other cowmen against you and Dad. He'd do anything to gain control of the Slash C. Oh, I know the drunken threats he's made against Dad!"

"I don't think Haddock would stoop to shoot a man from the brush, Jean," Cameron said grimly.

Anger flashed into Jean's eyes. "Cowmen would stoop to anything—sometimes!"

"You're wrong, Jean," he said softly.

She was crying then, her temper spent. She was strong-willed and proud, but to this tall, quiet-spoken man she turned now, her voice choked and pleading.

"Oh, Bob, it's all so utterly hopeless—our ever hoping for our fathers to come to an understanding! Every plan we ever made is going to smash. War is coming—and nothing we can do will stop it. I've tried to reason with Dad, but he won't listen. I'm afraid for you, Bob—for us."

"We'll have to sit tight, honey."

"No, Bob!" she cried impetuously. "Let's get out while we can. I'll go with you. I love you, Bob. We'll go some place where there isn't—isn't coal! We'll—"

Bob swept her into his arms. More than life itself, he wanted this girl for his own. He could stand the cowmen's scorn. Somewhere away from Gun-Flame Basin he and Jean could find happiness. But something greater than himself checked him.

"No, Jean," he said huskily. "We can't run from trouble. It would only haunt us the rest of our lives. After all, the cowmen are my people."

"And you'd fight for them against Dad?" she asked.

"I don't know."

JEAN drew back. Her silent, white-faced stare wrenched at Cameron's heart. She removed the diamond ring from her finger and handed it to him.

"I'm sorry, Bob," she said tremulously. "I see now what a blind fool I've been!"

Sobbing, she fled from the room. Fierce pride kept him from calling to her. Putting on his hat, he walked to the door and outside into the murky night. He didn't see the group of men at the front gate until one of them called to him:

"What's the matter, pill peddler? Jean turn you down?"

Cameron looked up, rage pouring through him in a white heat. Big Tod Sutcliffe stood facing him, a thin, ugly smile flattening his lips. Four other slicker-clad figures flanked him. Gun-heeled men they were, some of the hard-faced killers who had been hired by Sutcliffe to guard the mine.

"Well?" Sutcliffe sneered.

"Get out of the way, Sutcliffe," Cameron said softly.

On wide-spread legs the big mine boss stood blocking the walk. His raucous laugh drew a ring of curious miners.

"I've been waiting to put you in your pew, Cameron," he rasped. "We been standing here watching you paw over the boss's gal. You forgot the blind was up, I guess."

Cameron swung hard. With all the

power of his broad shoulders behind the blow, he knocked Sutcliffe flat. The gunmen fell back, hands stabbing to their guns. But the mine boss's snarling command stopped them. Cursing, wiping the mud from his square-jawed face, Sutcliffe climbed to his feet. He began peeling off his slicker, eyes seething with hate.

"Damn you, Cameron!" he grated. "You'll pay for this!"

Cameron was barely out of his slicker when the big miner charged. Quickly he sidestepped, dodging Sutcliffe's first murderous blow. But his foot slipped in the mud. He was off-balance, trying desperately to protect himself, when the miner's sledge-hammer fist smashed into the side of his head.

Crackling lights exploded in front of Cameron's eyes. Pain roared through him as he fell into the muddy street. Only dimly did he hear the encouraging shouts of Sutcliffe's men. Faces, lights of the town, swam dizzily all around him. Then the big miner was on him, kicking, gouging, raining down blows that would have finished lesser men.

Sutcliffe was a barroom fighter, tough and tricky. His mauling fists had quelled more than one riot among his men. He had boasted that he could whip any man in the basin.

"Fighter, eh?" he blatted. "Get up and fight, then!"

It was all hazy and red to Cameron after that. With breath sobbing from his lungs, he crawled to his knees, dripping mud, his face deathly white. He surged to his feet, swinging, feinting, lashing out with rights and lefts that rocked Sutcliffe back on his heels. Then both men were standing toe to toe, giving and taking. Neither of them knew when Sheriff Tom Andrews forged into the circle of ringing men.

"You'll have to stop, boys!" the lawman shouted weakly.

No one paid him any heed. Nor did anyone notice the giant black man who rode into town and sat his horse in the shadows close by, watching. On the porch of the boarding-house, Jean Thayer, too, saw it all. In the darkness beside her stood the fat Irish boarding-house keeper, a motherly woman who said consolingly:

"Stay here, honey. Doctor Bob is just proving he's the kind of man I figured him to be—a fighter!"

Cameron's lacing, chopping blows had already cut the miner's face. Panting, his features distorted with pain and rage, Sutcliffe began slowing. Cameron's fists felt like leaden weights. Agony flowed through every muscle of his aching body. He tottered a little as Sutcliffe swung a haymaker and missed. Then, with the last iota of his energy, Cameron hurtled forward. His rock-hard fist caught the miner on the jaw.

Sutcliffe sprawled in the middle of the muddy road and didn't move. Cheers rose from some of the miners. They had never liked this snarling mine boss. In the confusion, one of Sutcliffe's gunmen surged forward. He was a grizzled, thick-necked man whose bellows lifted above the turmoil.

"I'll take you now, Cameron!"

"Not now yo' won't, whiskery man!"

Black Sam gigged his horse into the inner ring, a huge black figure with a cocked six-shooter clenched in one fist.

"Yo' take me fust efen yo' still feels lucky. Stand back, yo' coal-heavin, sons of hell. Make a play fo' one of yo' guns, and daid men'll litterin' de road!"

III

BLACK SAM'S threat held Sutcliffe's gunmen. The deadly tension broke. Doc Cameron picked up his slicker, pulled it on, and Black Sam rode at his heels until he came to his horse at the hitch-rack in front of his office. Mounting, he cut across a vacant lot to the edge of town with

the loyal Negro spurring to overtake him. When he reined in, Black Sam pulled up at his side.

"They're meeting out at the ranch, Sam?" Cameron asked.

"Thass why I rode in, Doctuh Bob."

Black Sam was frightened. All day, he explained, he'd had the feeling that something was going to happen at the meeting tonight. He wanted the young medico there.

"I aim to be there, Sam," Cameron said queerly. "I'm going to make one more stab at bringing Dad and the other men to their senses. I'm going to get to the bottom of all this mess if it's the last thing I ever do."

"Bless de Lawd." Black Sam murmured dolefully.

They rode on, stirrup to stirrup, each silent, each with his own grim thoughts. Cameron braced himself for the welcome he would get at the Slash C. Old Bronc would be furious. But somehow Bob Cameron didn't care.

When the lights of the Slash C ranch house came into view through the rainy night, Cameron slowed. Saddled horses, rigs stood in the yard. Doc left his horse near the front gate, watched the big colored man ride on toward one of the sheds. From inside the house came the murmur of man-talk, the deep rumble of Old Bronc's voice calling for order.

At the edge of the porch young Cameron paused. Banker Jeff McVay's voice of appeal came to him:

"We've been friends for years, boys. I'm hoping that friendship will continue. Bear in mind, I'm simply acting as a go-between. Why you blind yourselves to the wealth of coal on your land is beyond me—"

Old Bronc cut him short, his voice taut with anger, "You're not a cowman, McVay. A cowman learns to love the land he fought the Injuns to hold. He'd rather raise cattle and starve than sell to a man like Thayer."

"Even if it meant losing his ranch?"

"You mean—" Old Bronc began.

"I mean all you men are mortgaged to me—and I see no chance of your pulling out with your cattle!" McVay snapped. "Most of your notes are already past due. And I've been riding along, hoping you'd accept Thayer's royalty proposition to sink shafts on your land. I prefer your friendship to your ranches. But foreclosure it'll be if you don't make up your minds. I'll give you a week, boys. In the meantime, I bid you good night."

Bob Cameron dodged back into the shadows as the banker barged outside. Climbing into a buckboard, McVay whirled the team out of the muddy wagon road. Inside the house, one of the ranchers broke the silence.

"What do you say now, Bronc?"

"The same thing, Patterson!" Old Bronc blurted stormily. "We'll stay—and fight! Somehow we'll raise the money to pay McVay."

"Easy to say, Bronc!" another cowman rapped bitterly. "But hard to do. I'm stripped clean, except for a few yearlings."

A dissenting wave of talk swept the gathering. Cowmen leaped to their feet. But just as quickly Chris Haddock's strident shout fetched order. He was a skinny, lantern-jawed man who packed two guns and knew how to use them. Years ago he had come up from Texas, homesteaded a section adjoining the Slash C, and had wedged his way into Old Bronc's favor.

"My vote goes with Bronc!" he barked. "A week to raise the money seems plenty. One way is to make a gather, summer or not, pool our stuff, and sacrifice to pay off McVay. McVay is working hand in glove with Thayer. Now he's intending to rob us!"

"Hold on, Haddock!"

"Wait till I finish, Patterson!" Haddock rasped. "Not over an hour ago, one of Weston's boys was shot by some of Thayer's gunmen. On the way to the meeting, I found the remains of a Slash C butchered beef. How Thayer's gunmen are sneaking through our

lines I don't know. But I do know how to stop it! Chase Thayer and his thieving breed out of the country with guns!"

A ROAR of approval came from the back-to-the-wall cowmen. But Chris Haddock whirled, his fiery challenge halting. Heads turned to stare. A gasp came from Old Bronc. Haddock's jaw sagged, his face drained colorless.

"Bob Cameron!" he gulped.

Doc Cameron stood framed in the doorway of that smoke-clouded room, his slicker and hat dripping wet. His bruised face was stiff, his eyes slitted, afire.

"You want war—is that it, Haddock?" he asked.

"We want what's ours!" Haddock countered.

"Bloodshed won't get it."

"Bob!" Old Bronc thundered.

"You're going to listen to what I have to say, Dad!" Bob rapped grimly. "Then you can beller yourself hoarse!"

And with that he strode farther into the room, a different man from the quiet-mannered young medico these cowmen had known. They stared uncomfortably, their faces drawn with varying emotions. There were Frank Weston, Limpy Shannon, Shanghai Pike and Pat Riley; men with shirttail outfits who had listened to the dictates of Old Bronc; men who smelled of sweat and rain and tobacco. Honest, God-fearing men to whom the cow business meant everything.

Sneering, Chris Haddock eased back against the wall where four of his men stood in indolent readiness. On each of them was the indelible stamp of gunman.

"My words will be few, gents," Doc said tightly. "I heard what Banker McVay told you just now. Go ahead and make your beef gather, if you will. But before you do anything rash, I ask that you give me a week to get to the bottom of these killings. I'll never be convinced that Lane Thayer condones such things."

"You'd say that," Chris Haddock said icily. "You being engaged to marry Old Thayer's daughter."

Bob checked the impulse to smash his fist into Haddock's leering face. Old Bronc stared, his great body settling.

"Is that right, Bob? he asked softly. "Are you planning to marry—her?"

"I was," admitted Doc softly. "But she turned me down."

Haddock grinned unpleasantly as Old Bronc's beaten eyes turned from face to face. When he looked at his son again, there was no condemnation in his gaze. Only disappointment and hurt.

"You can do what you damned well please, Bob," he said heavily. "I've told you that before." He turned to his men. "In the meantime, boys, my orders is to go ahead with the beef gather. Rake the draws and comb the hills. And kill any of Thayer's skunk breed that crosses the deadline. That's all."

Humiliation, defeat, burned inside of Doc Cameron as he turned away and stalked out to his horse. In attending this meeting tonight he had accomplished exactly nothing.

He was barely out of sight of the ranch house, heading toward town, when Black Sam overtook him. Black Sam had been beneath one of the windows. He had heard all that had been said.

"I reckon yo' might need me, Doctuh Bob," he murmured. "What now?"

"I don't know, Sam," Cameron said honestly.

Doc Cameron made a pallet on the floor in his office that night for Black Sam. Long after the turmoil of the town had ceased, he lay awake himself. When he finally slept, the same troubled thoughts filled his dreams.

He awoke at dawn, stiff and sore. The drizzle had stopped but it was cloudy and dismal. As he took Black Sam down to a restaurant to eat, he

felt the throbbing tension of the town. The street was almost deserted after the hubbub of last night. Threat of violence hung over the town like black storm clouds.

Toward noon, Cameron got a call to Shanty Town. He stayed with the suffering patient, forgetting to eat. When he returned to his office, Black Sam was waiting for him. Damning the torment that gripped him when he thought of Jean, he couldn't shake her from his mind.

DREARY nightfall came, but he didn't light a lamp. He was standing at one of the windows when suddenly he stiffened. Down in the street he saw Tod Sutcliffe ride up in front of one of the saloons. The mine foreman left his horse at the hitch-pole and strode inside. At the same time, a man darted out of the shadows adjoining the building, paused, then ducked through a side door into the saloon.

Cameron glanced at the wide-eyed Negro man at his side. Black Sam had seen that figure, too.

"Know who that was, Sam?"

"Yas, suh. Was Chris Haddock."

Puzzled, Cameron waited until he saw Haddock slip out the side door of the saloon, many minutes later. Then he led Black Sam down to their horses. As they reached the street they saw Banker McVay leave his bank and enter the same saloon which Chris Haddock had just left.

Cameron and Black Sam rode out of town, skirting the main street. In the wooded hills near the dead-line they rode cautiously, keening the damp air for alien sounds. After an hour, Cameron found himself within gunshot of Haddock's ranch, though he hardly knew what had drawn him there. The place appeared deserted.

Circling back, he was only a short distance from the ranch when his horse shied. Cameron's heart thumped, eyes flickering a warning to Black Sam. Quietly both men dismounted, crept forward through the brush. In a shallow draw they came upon the remains of a butchered steer.

Cupping a match, Cameron examined the hide. It was a Slash C beef. The hide was still warm!

"Let's head for Shanty Town, Sam!" Cameron muttered. "If there's any fresh meat there, we'll find it!"

They ran back to their horses, flung themselves astride and spurred deeper into the hills. Cameron followed the same course he had taken last night, staying in the high brush of the ravine. The night was thick and black, pregnant with phantom whispers of trouble.

On the brink of the hill overlooking the mine and Shanty Town, Cameron wheeled in. Black Sam croaked a warning and pointed. Below them, in a grove of cedars, miners were milling about in the darkness. Lanterns made moving blots of light. Jabbering talk rose in confusion.

Cold with dread, Cameron rode on down the slope. A miner spotted him and yelled. Then by the lantern glow Doc Cameron saw Sutcliffe and his gunman step back from the group, hands dropping to their guns. From the midst of the men, Lane Thayer's sharp command froze their movements.

"No shooting, Sutcliffe! Wait!"

Near that group of tense-bodied men Cameron reined in. He saw the dead man on the ground then. Stark terror showed in the eyes of the miners. Guns half-drawn, Sutcliffe and his men stood rigid, their red eyes glinting.

Thayer's face was gray. "It's Tony Bodetti, one of my men, Doc," he said.

"How and when did it happen?" Cameron asked hoarsely.

Sutcliffe stirred. "Within the last hour, Cameron," he grated. "As to how it happened, we'll leave that to you. You've associated with them cowmen long enough to know how they work. Tony Bodetti was sent to relieve one of the guards. Somewhere

back yonder in the timber he was waylaid and stabbed. That wasn't enough. His body was fetched down here under our eyes." Thayer added grimly, "This note was pinned to his shirt."

Cameron took the crumpled slip of paper the mine owner handed him. In the lanternlight his eyes raced over the crudely scrawled words:

> Miners that value their necks will take this as a warning and get out.

IV

ANGER wrenched at Doc Cameron.

"Cowmen don't stoop to back-stabbing murder, Thayer," he said sternly. "There's not a cowman in the basin who—"

He stopped short, knowing then that nothing he could say would change the minds of these men. A scornful smile curled Sutcliffe's lips. In the dead silence Thayer's words were like the lash of a whip.

"I used to think that too, Doc. I'm not blaming you. I'm not blaming the breed of men that sired you. Bodetti is the third man to die within a month. From here on we'll fight fire with fire, and by the Almighty, I aim to win! Before the night is over I'll have every loyal miner packing a gun. Those who want to leave can take a special train out tonight, and take the women folks with them!"

With a snapped order to care for Tony Bodetti's body, Thayer turned back toward the mine office. With Black Sam trailing him, Cameron rode on down the slope. All hope of averting war went dead within him. Clamoring inside him was the impulse to go to Jean, take her away as she had begged him to.

At the edge of Shanty Town, he reined in. "You go back to the ranch, Sam," he said flatly. "Whatever happens, you stay there with Dad."

Black Sam nodded mournfully and turned back. Cameron rode on into Shanty Town, past the squalid huts the miners had called home. Candlelight shone at some of the windows.

At Tony Bodetti's hut Cameron found the miner's widow alone. She was sitting on a box, clutching a baby to her breast, staring dry-eyed. Word of Tony's death had reached her.

"I know," she whispered. "Tony, he ees dead. You 'ave been good to us, *signor*."

Cameron told her that she and the other women would have to leave. He didn't have to explain what was going to happen. She nodded dully.

Cameron left. At the railroad siding he found Thayer ordering a special train made up. Miners and their wives who wanted to leave would ride in empty coal cars to Gallup.

Within an hour Shanty Town was seething with excitement. Calico-clad women, packing their belongings, trudged toward the train siding. Crying, whimpering waifs clung to their mothers' skirts. The train whistle sliced through the bedlam. A few miners were leaving; most of them had decided to stay.

Cameron lent a hand where he could. He gave himself no time to think. When there was nothing more he could do, he rode into town. In front of the boarding-house he reined in. He swallowed his pride. He wanted to see Jean.

The fat boarding-house keeper met him on the porch, lamp in one hand, face pale with fright.

"Jean—" Cameron snapped.

"She's gone, Doctor Bob. Just left to join her father at the mine. Said when I saw you to give you this."

She drew a note from her apron pocket. Cameron glanced at Jean's handwriting on the sheet of paper. He read:

> Bob,
>
> You were right when you said we couldn't run from trouble. I realize how foolish it was ever to hope for peace. I'm joining Dad at the mine to fight for my people, as you will fight for yours.
>
> JEAN

The boarding-house woman said, "Tod Sutcliffe rode away with her."

Cameron ran back out to his horse, mounted. Beyond Shanty Town he heard the shriek of the train whistle as it pulled out with the refugees.

His horse was plunging back along the main street when he saw a rider hurtling toward him from the edge of town. Black Sam's frantic cry rose above the pound of hoofs:

"Doctuh Bob! Doctuh Bob!" He was wheeling his horse then, spurring madly along at Doc Cameron's side, bawling at the top of his lungs, "Haid fo' de ranch, Doctuh! By de Lawd, Thayer and 'em minin' boys done struck!"

SHOCK poured through Cameron, a half-moan, half-sob escaping him. They were out in the brush before they could halt their bolting horses.

"It couldn't have been Thayer, Sam! I just saw him—"

Doc Cameron stopped, stunned by the realization that it had been over an hour since he had seen Thayer. He went sick and cold all over. At no time during the evacuation of Shanty Town had Cameron seen Tod Sutcliffe. And only at the railroad siding had he seen Lane Thayer. Then the mine owner had disappeared.

"I can't be wrong about it, Doctuh Bob!" Black Sam was babbling. "I shot Thayer's sorrel out from unduh him, but he got away. Oh, Lawd, Mistuh Bronc is dyin', callin' for yo' to come!"

Black Sam tried to explain. He had just returned to the Slash C when the raiders struck. The Slash C hands had been away, spreading the news to the other basin ranchers of another meeting. In the shed, Black Sam had made his stand. In the house, Old Bronc had put up a game fight until he'd fallen. As quickly as the miners had struck, they had vanished, taking their dead with them, leaving two dead horses behind.

"Get my medical kit out of my office, Sam!" Cameron rapped. "Hurry on out to the ranch. I'm going ahead." Then he was giving steel to his horse, knowing that Black Sam would do his bidding.

Out across the night-blanketed basin Cameron thundered, the agony of bitter memories clutching at his heart. Thoughts of Old Bronc wounded, probably dying, drove home the knowledge of the deathless bond between them.

If this was the end, Bob Cameron wanted to cast his lot with the cowmen. He wanted to close the breach of misunderstanding between himself and Old Bronc. Bitterness gave way to cold fury when he thought of Thayer's raid.

The chill night wind stung his feverish eyes. The foothills loomed before him. Then the lights of the Slash C ranch house seemed to leap up through the trees. And as he drew closer, he saw the saddled horses in the yard. The other basin men had heard of the raid, and had ridden there, prepared for war.

In the yard Doc curbed and lit running. Cowmen were congregated on the porch. Through the bullet-smashed windows he saw other basin warriors in the front room.

Across the porch he ran, halting as he reached the open doorway. All talk ceased as eyes stabbed him appraisingly. Raiders' bullets had smashed some of the furniture, pocked the walls.

Condemnation for Doc Cameron was strong in the cowmen.

"Dad?" he asked. "Where is he?"

"In the back room," a man named Shanghai Pike answered coldly.

Cameron crossed the room in long strides, hurrying down a dimly-lit corridor. The door to his father's bedroom stood ajar and he entered, his throat dry and aching as Old Bronc called to him feebly.

"Come in, Bob. Thank God—you're here."

Pat Riley and another rancher were in the room with Old Bronc, giving first aid. Old Bronc lay on his bed, boots removed, stripped to his waist. In the lamplight his rugged face was drawn, his eyes hot with pain.

"It was Thayer, Bob," he croaked. "Him and six or eight of his gunmen. I figured you'd come to your senses when you learned what a belly-crawling snake he is."

A red-hot iron seemed to be piercing Bob Cameron's heart. He called for hot water and clean bandages. He had his slicker off, was examining the crude bandage on his father as the two ranchers left the room.

"It's my side, Bob," Old Bronc gasped. "Just below the ribs."

It was a nasty bullet-hole.

When Pat Riley returned with warm water and clean bandages, Doc went to work. A moment later Black Sam came in with the medical kit.

Old Bronc cussed. "Haddock is in charge now, Riley," he called weakly. "Tell him—and the boys—to go ahead—"

CAMERON didn't catch the import of his father's words. He sterilized the oldester's wound, dressed it. hardly conscious of Pat Riley and Black Sam leaving the room.

"Thanks, son," Old Bronc murmured. "It hurts but not like it did. From here on I want you to overlook the past, Bob. I've failed, I know, but—"

"Rest, Dad."

"When I've had my say, Bob. Have they gone yet?"

As if in answer to his query, Chris Haddock's wrathful bellow came from the front yard.

"No need me telling you how, men. Ride, shoot, and kill! Smash and burn Shanty Town! But wipe out Thayer and his men first. They're holed up in the mine office. That's all, boys. Let's ride!"

Doc Cameron bounced to his feet, his blood freezing. Remembering that Jean was at the mine with her father, he charged down the corridor, across the deserted front room. With a cry born of the knowledge he was too late, he reached the porch. Already Chris Haddock and the basin cowmen were roaring off into the night riding hell-for-leather. War-crazed men whose sane reasoning had been swept away by the flood waters of killer lust.

Cameron sprinted toward his horse. He was halfway across the yard when a man's snarling challenge stopped him. He spun—and froze. Tod Sutcliffe strode quickly out of the porch shadows! There was a leveled six-shooter in the mine boss's fist. Beneath the brim of his hat his beady eyes were like coal pits, bright with deadly passions.

"Sutcliffe!" Cameron choked.

The mine boss's chuckle was like a curse.

"Back into the house with you, pill-man," he grated. "This is one fight with you I'm winning. Now move, or die here!"

Unarmed as he was, Doc had no choice. He entered the house, with Sutcliffe following, the six-shooter jammed into his back. Through the chaos of his mind dormant suspicion flared up.

"Into the bedroom with your old man, Cameron," Sutcliffe ordered.

Doc made for the corridor. As if in a nightmare, he heard his father call to him. Then they were in the bedroom where Old Bronc could see—and stare out of dumb-struck eyes.

"Sutcliffe!" he gasped hoarsely.

"Move over to the bed, Cameron!" Sutcliffe rasped to Doc.

His gun clicked at cock. And Cameron laughed, stalling, praying that he might get the truth from this man who was sending the cowmen to their doom. He knew the truth now, for in Sutcliffe's eyes treachery and cunning were unveiled.

"It was you who tried to kill me last night!"

A big figure suddenly filled the

doorway behind them. Black Sam's words lashed out.

All in one frenzied movement, Sutcliffe whirled, fired—and missed. Then Doc was on him, wrenching the gun from his grasp, driving him to the floor. Sutcliffe screamed like a wounded beast, cursing and fighting like a man berserk. Old Bronc's croaking shouts, Black Sam's howls, filled Doc's ears as his hands found the miner's throat.

He didn't know that Old Bronc was sitting up in bed, clutching his side. Through a red mist young Cameron saw Sutcliffe's distorted face. Horror, fear were in the mining man's bulging eyes, as his struggles slackened. With all the savage power of his steel-thewed body Bob Cameron choked the life out of the man, releasing his hold as he read fear of death in Sutcliffe's eyes.

"Now talk, damn you!" Doc panted. "It's your one chance of living, Sutcliffe!"

V

GREAT gulps of air swept into Sutcliffe's lungs. The last shred of his courage was gone. Like a whipped, craven thing he was clinging desperately to his life.

"I'll talk—Cameron!" he choked. "I admit trying to bushwhack you last night to get you out of the way. Haddock talked me into this deal. He and his gun hands made the raid here tonight, pretending to be Thayer and his men. I sneaked Thayer's horse to Chris. By making it war, he saw a chance to kill off Thayer and wipe out the cowmen. Then him and me was to have the mine and access to the basin coal land.

"If Haddock's plan works, Banker McVay will die tonight. Haddock had me hole up the miners in the mine office as a decoy. The men that worked for me and Haddock's gunmen are hid in the mountain pass, waiting to wipe out the cowmen in one stroke. When they near the spot, Haddock aims to fall behind—"

"Jean and her father?" Cameron gritted.

"They're in the mine—prisoners," Sutcliffe whimpered. "Haddock made me do it. I was to meet him down there after the fight—"

Cameron drew Sutcliffe to his feet, throttling the mad impulse to finish him. He jerked the cartidge belt from beneath the mine boss's slicker, strapped it about himself. As he snatched up the fallen pistol, Old Bronc cried chokingly:

"Wait, Bob!"

"Stay here, Dad!"

"No, son. All I'm asking is for God to give me the strength to right an awful wrong."

At the door of the room, Bob yelled back, "Watch Sutcliffe, Sam. If he makes a move, kill him!" Then he was charging through the house.

Back of him trailed Old Bronc, face alkali-white from the agony of his wound. Only an iron will kept him going, a driving force that transcended all physical pain. Naked to the waist, he reached the porch, buckling a six-shooter about his middle.

"Fetch me a horse, son."

"Take mine, Dad."

At the edge of the brush, Bob Cameron espied the horse Sutcliffe had evidently ridden. He made for it, hitting leather in one leap. As he thundered across the yard Old Bronc joined him. Side by side they made for the timbered hills, father and son, roweled by the same dread and hate. And Cameron knew that if they lived, things would be different.

Then above the hoof-thunder he heard the faint echo of gunfire in the night ahead. Through the canyons it rolled, ebbing and flowing like a dirge that meant doom for innocent men.

Old Bronc's yell was lost in the crash of underbrush and sounds of battle. A riderless horse came galloping out of the pass, swerving as Doc swooped into the lead. Yonder in the

darkness he saw the flashes of gunfire, and a glad cry broke from him. Haddock's death trap had failed!

From the brushy coverts on the sloping walls of the pass, Haddock's and Sutcliffe's combined gun force was slowly retreating under the deadly return fire of the enraged cowmen. Patently the cowmen had suffered in that first hail of bushwhack lead. But now they were off their horses, behind cover, slowly advancing.

At the top of his lungs Doc Cameron shouted, "Dad, get to cover!"

But only killer lead could stop the whooping old warrior. Once and for all he wanted to crush the tyranny that had ruled Gun-Flame Basin. Afire with vengeance lust, he followed his medico son into that black maw of gunflame hell, his pistol spewing at the hidden killers. And the hired gunmen, without a leader to drive them on, began scattering.

Shadowy figures of the cowmen rose up in front of young Cameron, startled by this new threat from the rear. They must have heard Doc's yells:

"Fan out! Kill as you go!"

THEN Old Bronc's shouts brought answer from the men he had always led. Over toward the far hillside, Doc glimpsed a fleeing figure. He knew it was one of the hired gunmen. He shot, and the man fell. Then, as he wheeled up, Pat Riley and three other cowmen rushed toward him.

"Haddock?" Riley bawled in reply to the medico's question. "Ain't seen him since the fight started, Doc."

"Get these men together and finish the job, Dad!" Cameron yelled. "Explain to them. I'm going on to the mine."

A hunch sent him spurring deeper into the pass, ignoring the confusion behind him. Twice in the high brush he was the target for the wild lead of fleeing gunmen. And each time he fired back, never knowing whether his shots went home or not.

Luck rode with him in that ride through the pass. A burning sensation in his hip told him he had been hit. Weakness and nausea rolled through him. But the knowledge that Jean and her father were prisoners in the mine was a spur to his strength. His prayer was that they would be alive, that Chris Haddock would be with them. He wanted to kill Haddock for the chaos he had wrought.

Cameron's tiring horse topped the hill, plunging down the slope. The mine buildings were dark. Only a light or two glimmered in the darkness where Shanty Town lay. A single lantern still burned atop the wooden rig over the mine shaft. But in the eerie gloom of the place Cameron's spine tingled with the unseen threat. Loyal miners were crowded in that mine office, guns primed to defend Thayer's interests.

As he swooped near, he shouted, "Hold your fire, men! It's Doc Cameron!"

Then he was curbing near the shaft, hitting the ground in full stride. The night echoed to the rising tide of voices, the trample of boots as miners poured from the buildings.

A Mexican miner's cry sheered through the turmoil, "Where ees the Señor Thayer? We hide in the office as he say, but he ees not weeth us. What is happen? Señor Sutcliffe, he jus' a few minutes ago ride up an' enter the mine—alone."

"Sutcliffe?" C a m e r o n snapped. "That's impossible."

"Eet was dark. Not for certain do I know eet was Señor Sutcliffe. I only theenk eet was heem. He leap from his horse an' run to the cage an' wave to be lowered."

"Then lower me!" Cameron gritted. "Quick! I know who's down there!"

He broke through the circling men, snatching a lantern from one of the miners. As he sprang onto the cage, the engine man was already dashing around the huge boiler. Cameron felt the cage quiver beneath his feet.

Overhead the steel cables groaned. Then he was being shot down, down.

From the cage he plunged headlong through the main tunnel, lantern in one hand and pistol in the other.

Faint yellow light showed ahead where the tunnel angled. Cameron stopped and put down his lantern. He went ahead then, feeling his way, a cold clamminess stealing over him. The gibbering whisper of a man's voice drifted through the shaft.

THEN, as Cameron rounded the curve, he saw a huge underground room before him. Against one wall were Jean Thayer and her father, bound and gagged. Across from them stood Chris Haddock, the lantern glow shadowing his bony, evil face.

"Sutcliffe will be here purty soon, Thayer," Haddock taunted. "He'll finish you then. A cave-in will cover you so nobody will ever know."

Cameron, ten feet away, said, "You're wrong, Haddock. Sutcliffe is done for. Your hellish murder scheme has failed!"

Chris Haddock whirled, speechless, stunned. His sneaky eyes bulged out of his bony face. Then with a snarl he went for his gun.

The entire mine tunnel threw back the deafening echoes of crashing pistols. Cameron felt the whine of a bullet past his cheek. He shot and shot again, even as Haddock began bending in the middle. All the life washed out of Haddock's eyes. He was dead before he hit the floor.

"That squares things with the snakes who tried to frame us, Thayer," Cameron heard himself saying. "With Haddock dead, maybe you and Dad can get together."

Cameron slashed the bonds that held the two prisoners. Jean rushed into his arms, sobbing. Lane Thayer looked like a dead man who had suddenly come to life.

Together they went back to the main shaft. As the cage lifted them, Cameron held to Jean, thrilling to what he saw in her tear-wet eyes.

Old Bronc was in the ring of men to greet them as they came to the ground level. The cowmen and miners were there, all talking at once. But a hush came when Cameron greeted his father.

"It's bed for you, Dad," he said softly. "You're reeling on your feet. After that, I hope you and Thayer can come to satisfactory terms. In talk, not war, you'll find real peace."

They hustled Old Bronc into the mine office and laid him on a bunk. Later, when Black Sam made his appearance, Cameron asked about Tod Sutcliffe. Black Sam said they wouldn't have to worry about the mine boss any longer.

"What happened?"

"He moved," Black Sam said significantly.

It was the next afternoon before Old Bronc and Lane Thayer had their real talk. When the session was over, they called in Doc Cameron. The harshness was gone from Old Bronc's face. In his eyes was the soft prideful glow of a strong man who has learned a mighty lesson.

"Thayer's proposition *is* fair, Bob," he said contritely. "There's no need of blinding myself to facts. This *is* coal land, and such it's bound to be. I'm happy, in a way, son. I'm happy and thankful that you opened my eyes. Now we cowmen can pay off the bank our indebtedness. With a clean slate we can move back into the hills and start new. It's a fine land back there for cattle. Fine. And Bob—"

"Yes, Dad?"

Old Bronc tried to grin, though his eyes were wet. "You are a fighter, son. One from way back. Whatever you and Jean plan to do, remember I'll want you to spend part of your time out on the ranch with me."

When Doc Cameron left, there was a lump in his throat he couldn't swallow. Jean was waiting for him outside the door, his ring on her finger.

Folks figured him a harmless old windbag until he let the air out of a couple of bank robbers

Rushing into the alley, Cal saw the two men

Cavalry Cal's Crusade

By LESLIE ERNENWEIN

CAVALRY CAL BENTON was drunk. Not mean or staggering drunk, but just enough to make him forget that he'd been the laughing-stock of Singletree for five days. Of course folks had sometimes gibed at his tall tales in the past. Even his daughter Ellen, who ran the millinery

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shop and was engaged to Sheriff Tom Bishop, sometimes chided him for what she called "telling whoppers." But no one had really laughed at him until he'd warned Sheriff Tom about the bank holdup and his warning had turned into a town joke.

There wasn't much for a stove-up old trooper to be proud about except his memories, nor anything much he could do in the way of work. He had tried to talk Tom Bishop into making him a part-time deputy since the silver boom had brought so many toughs to Singletree, but Tom said folks might think he was bribing Ellen to marry him. So all Cal could earn was what Scat Potter, the liveryman, gave him for toting hay out to the corral feed troughs morning and evening.

For five long and dreary days Cavalry Cal had squirmed each time someone asked, "How's the holdup business today?" Or when some smart aleck called him "Calamity Cal." They'd acted like his warning was just a drunkard's dream, and their laughter had tarnished all his fine memories of the past.

But now, as he hugged close up to the Belladonna bar, Cavalry Cal was his old self again. His faded eyes sparkled and his quavering voice took on a note of pride as he told Joe Breen, the Tucson drygoods drummer, about the Battle of the Washita.

"That was when me and General Custer was chasin' the Injuns out of the Canadian River country in Sixty-eight," Cal explained proudly, nursing the glass of bourbon Breen had provided. "There was eleven companies of the Seventh and every man-jack of us itchin' for action."

A stylishly garbed stranger with a gambler's pale and inexpressive face stood at Cal's left elbow. "Are you sure it wasn't fleas that made you itch?" he asked slyly.

And another stranger whose beefy face rutted with amusement, declared, "Pop says every man in the Seventh Cavalry had fleas!"

Cal glanced at the two men impatiently. "I ain't talkin' to you," he objected.

"Well, we can't help hearin' your spiel," the beefy one said. "You talk too loud and too much."

It occurred to Cavalry Cal that there was something remotely familiar about this man. Yet he couldn't recall ever having seen him until this moment. Singletree was full of strangers these days, tough, smart-alecks come to grab some easy money from the miners.

"You've had enough, Cal," Suds Maddigan, the bartender, said quietly. "Better go home."

"But Mr. Breen wants to hear my story," Cal insisted. He turned to Breen, picking up the tale where he'd left off.

"There'd been a heap of scalpin' done that summer—homes burned and babies with their heads bashed in by war clubs. Stuff like that. Made you sick to see it. And mad clear through. Us troopers was so anxious for revenge on them red devils that every day of searchin' seemed like a week."

"That," Breen broke in, "reminds me that I'm in search of supper. I'll see you here after a while, Pop."

Cavalry Cal sighed. In fifteen years he'd never succeeded in telling the whole story about his part in the Battle of the Washita. Something always interfered. Seemed like folks just weren't much interested in the grand old Seventh Cavalry no more, now that the Injuns were all on reservations.

Joe Breen had appeared like he'd be a good listener, and he was certainly generous about buying a drink for a feller. Cal wondered if the drummer would show up as promised, and hoped he would. It'd be nice to tell the whole story just once.

THE WHISKY glow was fading as Cavalry Cal went to Potter's livery for his evening chore of feeding

the corral stock. When Scat asked, "Heard any more hot rumors about bandits?" Cal squirmed. He felt like giving Scat a piece of his mind. But the liveryman was good about handing over a dollar when a man needed a drink. So Cal just shrugged and climbed the hayloft ladder.

This, he reflected, was sorry work for a man who'd served with the Seventh, who'd followed General Custer from hell to breakfast with the guidons whipping their forked tails in the breeze and bugles blowing. Little had he reckoned in those tumultuous times that he would be reduced to doing a boy's chores in his home town. It was enough to give a man the creeping miseries.

Cal pitched hay from the loft's rear door, then jumped down and toted it to the feed troughs. In the old days he'd never taken a job that couldn't be done on horseback. And usually he'd needed a gun to boot. Trail-driving jobs and working with salty galoots in tough cow camps. But the cavalry had been best. Always lots of action in the cavalry.

That's why he'd been so keyed up last week when he heard those two men talking about holding up the bank. He'd been a trifle drunk that evening, and so it was dark by the time he got out here to the last feed trough, smack-dab against the alley fence.

But his attention had been attracted by a match flare behind the Belladonna, and then he had heard a man say, "It'll be easy, Tex. We walk in there at noon when all but the old jigger have gone to eat. Then we let ourselves out the back door where our horses are waiting."

Cal's heart had pounded so loud then that he could scarcely hear for the thumping of it, but he'd been almost certain that Tex had said, "Tomorrow at noon."

Cavalry Cal swore softly, remembering the rest of it, how he'd rushed to tell Sheriff Tom and finally located him at home with Ellen. Tom had got a trifle excited also, but Ellen stepped up close to smell his breath and asked, "Are you sure you didn't just imagine it, Dad?"

Cal had been indignant. His own daughter doubting his word, acting like he was some boozy gaffer that got fancy dreams every time he took a drink. But Tom believed him and made elaborate plans to trap the hold-up men. He'd sworn in a dozen citizens, including Cal, as deputies and they'd been stationed at strategic points.

It had made Cal feel young again, having a gun in his hands. It had given him the old goose-pimply feeling he'd used to get just before going into action. Of course it wasn't like the cavalry. Yet, because bank robbers usually tried to shoot their way out of traps, Cal had a fine feeling of anticipation.

But the bandits hadn't shown up that day, nor the next, nor the third day. And by then folks were calling him "Calamity Cal" and laughing at him. Even Tom, who'd always treated him kindly, had taken to giving him short answers. And although Ellen hadn't exactly said so, she showed that she was ashamed of him.

That was the part Cavalry Cal regretted more than anything else. For Ellen was a proud girl. She'd always held her head high, like her mother who'd owned the millinery shop and willed it to Ellen.

And he'd been prideful himself, Cal reflected, until this past week. A thing like that got under your skin. Having a whole town figure you were a drunken old fool was more than a man could take, day after day. It spoiled the taste of your vittles and made you lay awake nights trying to figure out a way to go off someplace where you weren't known.

FINISHED with the hay, Cal tromped home for supper. Residential Avenue was deserted at this

hour. Lamplight shone across dusk-veiled yards. The fragrance of wood smoke and fresh-baked biscuits was a good smell in the air, and farther down the avenue a woman called, "Clar-rence! Come home to sup-per-r-r!"

Cavalry Cal liked Singletree best at this time of day. There was something real cheerful and nice about lamplit windows and families around supper tables. It made him recall when he and his wife Mary and little Ellen had first come here to live. He'd taken a job breaking broncs for young Scat Potter. But he'd had an itchy foot and when Mary opened the millinery shop he'd gone north to work a roundup with the Hashknife outfit. Seemed like a long time ago.

The sagging front door reminded Cal that the hinges needed resetting and that he'd promised Ellen to do the job. He thought, I'll do it tomorrow sure, as he'd thought countless other times.

Ellen had finished eating. "I'm going to the school social with Tom," she said. "He has to leave early on account of catching the night stage to Tombstone."

"What's he goin' there for?" Cal asked, washing at the sink.

"Some county business," Ellen said, and brought his supper from the back of the stove.

Cal watched her as he plied the towel. She was like her mother had been twenty years ago. The same brown hair and blue eyes, the same proud way of holding her head. A fine and proper girl, Cal reflected. But she wasn't proud of him. Not after last week.

He sat down to the table and said, "Tom acts like he don't cotton to me no more."

Ellen fussed with her hair in front of the mirror. "You can scarcely blame him, Dad," she said gravely. "Folks have done a lot of funning with Tom about the bandit trap he set. They're saying he swore in so many deputies that he scared the bank robbers clean out of the country."

"Mebbeso," Cal suggested. "Mebbe that's why they never showed up."

"Fiddlesticks," Ellen retorted. Presently she added, "You shouldn't drink so much, Dad. It's affecting your mind."

Cavalry Cal put down his knife and fork. He stood up and faced Ellen. "Do you still think I imagined about them bandits?" he demanded.

"Yes," Ellen murmured, "and so does everyone else in town."

Cal swore. He took his battered hat from its peg and strode outside, ignoring Ellen's irritable suggestion that he eat his supper. How could a man enjoy his vittles with that kind of talk? How could you sit there and eat when your own daughter as much as called you an addle-brained old bum?

On his way to Main Street Cavalry Cal made up his mind to leave Singletree. No use to stay in a town that laughed at you all the time. Not when your own daughter said your noggin was full of drunkard's dreams. Maybe he could get a ride to Tucson with Joe Breen. The drummer drove from town to town with his samples. Perhaps he'd give an old man a ride.

HIS mind full of these thoughts, Cal went to the Belladonna, hoping Breen would be there. He uttered a gusty grunt of pleasure when he saw the derby-wearing drummer at the bar.

"Have a drink," Breen invited in friendly fashion.

Here, Cal thought, was a man after his own heart. Breen liked a little sociability of an evening, and had the money to provide it. "Don't mind if I do," Cal admitted, "and I'll tell you the rest of that story."

Breen settled himself comfortably on his elbows. "Go ahead," he suggested. "My ears are wide open."

"Well," Cal said, "it was the morning of November twenty-six when our Osage scouts told General Custer

they'd located the Injun encampment we was lookin' for. Like I said, that was the winter of Sixty-eight and snow drifts was knee-high to our horses. But the good news made us forget our frost-bit feet and half-rationed stomachs as we worked the supply wagons into camp formation.

"It was Captain Hamilton's turn to be in charge of the guard detail, which meant that I'd be in it too, belongin' to Hamilton's outfit. But he appealed to Custer for permission to ride with the attack and finally the general gave in, Hamilton bein' one of our best officers. Of course that pleasured me also and the captain was happy as six drunk sheepherders.

"If he'd of knowed how things was goin' to work out, Captain Hamilton wouldn't of been sittin' so high in his saddle. But there he was, bigger'n Billy-be-damn when we got the Injun camp surrounded and the band struck up a few notes of our regimental tune —*Garryowen.*"

Cavalry Cal's eyes glowed with the memory. "What a fight that was," he proclaimed.

"How does the song go?" Breen inquired. "That *Garryowen.* Don't believe I ever heard the words."

Cal finished off his drink, regretting this interruption but half pleased to furnish the information. Not many folks knew all the words to *Garryowen,* unless they'd served with the Seventh.

"It goes like this," Cal said, and because the whisky made a warm glow in his empty stomach, he decided to sing the first stanza:

Let Bacchus' sons be not dismayed,
But join with me, each jovial blade.
Come booze and sing, and lend your aid,
To help me with the chorus!

Joe Breen laughed and slapped Cavalry Cal affectionately on the shoulder. "That's topnotch singing," he praised. "How does the chorus go?"

Cal preferred to get on with the story, and besides, Suds Maddigan was scowling at him from down the bar. But Breen urged, "Come on, Pop. Let's have the chorus."

So Cavalry Cal cleared his throat and sang:

Instead of spa we'll drink down ale,
And pay the reckonin' on the nail.
No man for debt shall go to jail
From Gar-r-ry-owen in glo-ree-ee!

Then, while Breen applauded and ordered up another round of drinks, Cal said, "Like I was sayin', what a fight it was. When the bugles sounded "charge" we rode hell for leather, yellin' and shootin'. Three of our columns comin' from different directions, hit the camp at the same instant and the fourth column wasn't more'n three-four minutes behind. It sure was a sight to see—Injuns divin' from a hundred lodges, firin' as they ducked behind trees. Horses goin' down and troopers cussin'!"

A group of miners burst through the batwings. One of them yelled, "Set up the panther sweat, Suds!" Other customers were drifting in, but Cavalry Cal paid them no heed, stopping only to down the drinks Breen generously provided.

"We took the village in jig time," Cal related. "But the real fight, the dog-eat-dog Battle of the Washita took hours and hours. Every danged tree had a redskin behind it. And them devils had plenty guns."

"What good would guns do Indians?" a voice behind Cal asked scoffingly. "Everybody knows an Indian couldn't hit anything with a bullet."

CAVALRY CAL whirled, peered angrily at the beefy stranger. "So it's you again!" he blurted.

"Yes, and I still say you run off at the jaw too much," the man muttered flatly.

Again, as it had this afternoon, the impression came to Cal that he'd met this man somewhere. But he couldn't seem to place the sharp, cold eyes and meaty cheeks.

"Go on with your yarn," Breen suggested. "It's getting late and I'm leaving for Tucson at sunup."

That reminded Cal that he wanted to leave Singletree, so he asked, "How's chances of ridin' with you tomorrow?"

"Sure," Breen said, and ordered more bourbon. "We'll take a jug along and you can sing *Garryowen* all the way to Tucson, eh Pop?"

Cal nodded, glad that his plan was working so well. Everything would be fine once he was shut of Singletree. Folks in Tucson wouldn't know him from Adam's off ox. They wouldn't be snickering at him every time he showed his face on Main Street. Of course he'd miss Ellen's good cooking, and that comfortable bed at the house. But a man had to do without some things, and he sure could do without Singletree's smart alecks.

As if from across the room Cal heard Breen ask, "Are you drunk, Pop?"

It occurred to Cal that maybe he was a trifle tipsy. Must be from not eating supper. He surely hadn't drank much. Not more than two or three. Or was it four?

Cal shook his head, and took a firm hold on the bar. "Nope," Cal denied. "Like I said, them Injuns had lots of guns. Never in all my borned days have I saw Injuns fight a losin' battle like they fit that one. Later on we found out why, but it sure had us guessin' at the time."

"What you guessin' about?" Breen asked drowsily, as if just waking up.

Cal felt a trifle drowsy himself. "Guessin'?" he asked. "Who says I'm guessin'. I was there, man. Saw every danged bit of it with my own eyes!"

"Then you should know what you was guessing about," Breen insisted. "Maybe you need another drink."

The drummer called for Maddigan who refilled their glasses, whereupon Breen suggested a toast, "To *Garryowen*, who won the Battle of the Wash—Washboard!"

"Washita," Cal corrected, sure now that Breen was drunk. "And it weren't *Garryowen* that won it. It was me and General Custer and Captain Hamilton."

Breen peered at Cal as if seeing him for the first time. "What battle you talking about?" he demanded.

Cavalry Cal took his drink at a gulp. Queer, he reflected, how Breen had changed. The drummer had seemed spic and span a few minutes ago. Now he had a fuzzy look about him, as if he needed a shave, or something. And he was wearing two bow ties.

"Well, anyway," Cal continued slowly, "it was a awful fight. In and out, from tree to tree, from hill to hill and valley to valley them devils fit us every inch of the way. That first charge of our'n was followed by a hundred charges before we got the job done."

"What day was that?" Breen asked thickly.

"November twenty-six," Cal said. "Seems like yesterday. I recollect that we found Chief Black Kettle among the hundred odd dead Injuns. He'd been scalped clean as a whistle by one of our Osage scouts. And we found out why they'd put up such a fight. That village was occupied by Cheyennes, Arapahoes and Sioux, with more danged provisions than you could shake a stick at.

"There was eight hundred seventy-five horses, over five hundred sixty buffalo robes, four hundred seventy blankets and seven hundred pounds of tobacco in addition to scads and scads of powder, dried buffalo meat, flour and other stuff. That's why they fit us like they did—not wantin' to lose all them supplies with a long winter ahead."

CAVALRY CAL steadied himself and rolled up his left sleeve to show the puckered scar of an old wound. And because this was the

very first time he'd reached the end of his story, Cal chuckled happily.

"Here's all I got out of it," he said. "We lost lots of men. But only two officers got killed. One of them was Captain Hamilton. Ain't that odd?"

Breen made no comment and now Cal noticed the way the drummer stood, with his body slumped against the bar and his head resting in the crook of an arm.

"Drunk," Cal muttered disgustedly.

He was outside, having difficulty balancing for the step down from the saloon stoop, when it occurred to him that he was drunk also. Staggering drunk. Whereupon he decided to spend the night at Potter's livery.

Bright sunlight poured into the hayloft when Cavalry Cal Benton awoke. "Must be near noon," he muttered, and blinked at the barn's cobwebbed ceiling.

It occurred to him that Joe Breen had probably overslept also. Cal swore dismally, and rubbed his aching head. A man was a danged fool to get drunk, he reflected. No matter how high you felt last night you always felt lower'n snake sign in a wheel rut the next morning.

Morning!

Gosh—he hadn't fed the corral stock.

Cavalry Cal got to his feet and stood for a moment, shaking the drowsiness out of his head. Scat Potter would probably fire him. The liveryman might tell it around town, in which case Ellen would hear of it and be more ashamed than ever. You couldn't blame her, Cal thought dejectedly. It was enough to make a proud girl ashamed, knowing her father couldn't keep a piddling job because he got staggering drunk.

As he started down the ladder Cal heard voices below him—a man saying, "We're heading out for Tombstone."

The voice was familiar. For an instant Cal thought it sounded like the man he'd heard in the alley talking about the bank holdup. Then, as he went down the ladder and saw two men ride out of the stable, Cal knew why the voice seemed familiar. One of the men was the beefy-faced stranger who'd accused him of talking too much.

"So you finally sobered up," Scat Potter greeted accusingly.

Cal nodded, having no words to express his shame.

"Well, that'll be the last time you sleep off a drunk in my hayloft," Potter said crankily. "I ain't takin' chances on havin' my barn burnt up."

"You mean I'm fired?" Cal asked.

"Yes," Potter said and turned into the harness room.

Cavalry Cal shrugged his age-sagged shoulders. Seemed like everybody was down on him. He was too ashamed to walk down Main Street so he took the back alley toward Residential Avenue.

There'd be coffee in the pot at home, he guessed, and maybe some biscuits left over from breakfast. The taste of last night's whisky was sour in his mouth and he felt older now than he'd ever felt. "Six years older'n Satan," Cal muttered.

He kicked a tin can and cursed. This was an unfitting way for an ex-cavalryman to travel, stumbling down a back alley like a cringing cur. It didn't seem possible that a man could lose every stitch of pride in so short a time.

One week ago he'd held his head high and folks had treated him the way an old soldier should be treated. With due respect. But now, just because he'd tried to save this town from having its bank robbed—

Which was when Cal noticed the two horses tied to a fence behind the Citizens' Bank. For a moment he wondered why anyone would tie up there. Then he stopped in midstride and blurted, "Bank robbers, by grab!"

Yet even then, certain as he was, Cal took time to investigate the horses' brands, wanting to make sure

they didn't belong to some roundabout rancher. One of the horses, a red roan, had what looked like a Six F Connected on its hip, and the bay wore one of those Mexican bug brands that no one could figure out.

At this moment, as Cal turned from the horses, he remembered seeing the fat-faced stranger ride out of the livery on a red roan a few minutes ago. And then, like a bolt from the blue, he understood why that beefy-cheeked galoot had seemed familiar. His voice—the same identical voice Cal had heard in the alley!

No wonder Beefy and his pardner Tex had hoorawed him about running off at the mouth so much. He'd spoiled their plan last week. But now, knowing the folks thought it had been a false alarm, they were giving it another try!

CAL RAN down the alley, and wondered if Tom Bishop would believe him. "He's got to," Cal panted to himself. "I can show him them horses." Then, as he entered the sheriff's office, Cal remembered that Tom had gone to Tombstone.

"Gosh A'mighty!" Cal croaked. "No sheriff in town at a time like this!"

He looked at the clock on the wall and saw that it was one minute to twelve. And then he remembered what Beefy had said about robbing the bank at noon *when the old jigger is alone.*

Cavalry Cal thought of running to spread the alarm. But the grim conviction that no one would believe him caused Cal to discard that plan at once. And besides, there wasn't time. Those two bandits were probably holding up old man Morgan right now —were most likely stuffing money into a sack and unlocking the rear door. Cal gulped and reached for the scattergun above Tom's desk. If he could get back into the alley before the bandits got asaddle there might be a chance to stop their getaway!

Ellen had money in that bank, and so did lots of other folks. Honest, hard-working folks who'd lose their life's savings unless he stopped those bandits. The same folks who'd laughed at him, by grab!

Cal was going out the door when it occurred to him that the scattergun might not be loaded. Investigating, he found it empty. He whirled back to the desk, pulled drawers open, searched frenziedly for shells and finally found the box. Loading the gun with trembling fingers, Cal raced out of the office and heard Ellen call from the millinery doorway, "Dad, where you going with that gun?"

Cal felt like stopping to tell her, to explain that now he had positive proof that his warning about the bandits hadn't been a drunkard's dream. It would be good to see some respect in her eyes again and to tell her she didn't have to be ashamed of her old daddy. But there was no time for talk.

Rushing into the alley Cal saw two men step from the rear door, each with a bag in one hand and a gun in the other. They saw him at this same instant and one of them fired at once. That first bullet whanged past Cal's head, but he didn't stop. He charged forward, knowing he had to get close before the scattergun would be effective.

Another bullet sang viciously past him. Just like the Washita, he thought, and then a slug that he didn't hear, staggered him. But he kept going, kept telling himself that this was the way the Seventh went into action, charging hell-for-leather. A bullet tore through his right arm, its impact whirling him almost completely around and knocking the gun from his hands.

In this tumultuous moment Cal saw the two bandits grab for their horses and he knew he had only a few seconds in which to stop them.

When Cal reached down for the scattergun his wounded leg gave way so that he went to his knees. But al-

most immediately he was up and limping forward. And now, as the bandits began firing again, Cavalry Cal fired also—both barrels in rapid succession. Then he grasped the empty weapon club fashion and hobbled forward again—the way a cavalryman would advance for hand-to-hand combat.

He was like that, limping and peering through the haze of powdersmoke when his hurt leg buckled and he fell. . . .

It was a queer thing. An astonishing thing. When Cavalry Cal Benton first opened his eyes he thought he was dreaming. He wasn't home, nor in the hayloft at Potter's livery. He was in a hotel room and Ellen was leaning over the bed exclaiming, "Oh, Dad—I'm so proud of you!"

Proud of you!

Those words were like bells ringing joyously. Ellen was smiling, but she seemed to be crying also, for tears streamed down her cheeks as she asked, "Can you ever forgive us for doubting you?"

"Sure," Cal said, and not knowing what else to say, said it again. "Sure."

Then, as he hunched up on his good elbow, Cal saw Tom Bishop standing with Suds Maddigan, Scat Potter and Joe Breen. Tom spoke. "He was right all the time and none of us would believe him."

Tom looked like he was ready to cry, which seemed odd.

Joe Breen came up to the bed and offered his hand, saying, "I thought you was spinning a windy about that battle last night, but now I know it was the truth. How about riding to Tucson with me, soon as you're able to make it."

"Tucson?" Ellen asked, "Why would Dad be going to Tucson?"

Breen shrugged, said, "I guess he has an itchy foot, which is natural for an old crusader like him."

Cavalry Cal grinned up at Ellen, knowing she'd never be ashamed of him again. "I'm goin' to stay right here in Singletree," he said, "where folks know how to make an old soldier feel tol'able proud!"

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CALAMITY

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A pair of fighting buckskin men team up with Uncle Sam's Army to put the Indian Sign on a murderous renegade trader. . . .

Harney's right arm stretched out as he leaped toward Brad and Angela

ROAD

A Novelet by J. EDWARD LEITHEAD

I

OVER the pointed logs of the stockade wall, the two long-haired men in buckskin intently watched the speeding pony riders on the dun plain westward. Shrill yells and the flat bark of trade guns punctuated the desperate drumming of hooves.

"You don't need no spy-glass," remarked the elder of the watching men, silver-bearded, with myriad wrinkles seaming craggy features, "to name that gone beaver out in front. It's Job Catlin, and when the Injuns get done with him, he won't make no more threats to drive us out of the Arrow River country!"

Tall and straight of figure as the ramrod of his Jake Hawkins rifle, young Sam Harney shifted uneasily on moccasined feet while he weighed old Wash Braxton's words. It went against the grain to keep the trading post gates closed to a white man in danger of a hair-raising, yet Job Catlin, powerful trader, had made a hos-

tile declaration he would tolerate no rival trading outfit even on the edge of his dominion.

But the Harney-Braxton post was well-guarded, and already the fairer dealing of these trap trail partners had drawn considerable white and Indian trade, in beaver skins and buffalo hides, to the new fortlike structure at Buckhorn Knob.

"What I can't savvy," Sam declared, "is why Catlin should be running from any passel of Injuns. They're Blackfeet, and he stands hoss-high with that tribe, like he does with the Shoshones and Crows."

"Found him out at some of his tricky trading, probably," grunted Wash Braxton, clasping hands on his rifle muzzle. "And jumped him too far from his fort for the greedy cuss to back-scramble to cover. He sure headed for the wrong port when he dodged thisaway!"

The tail of Sam's old coonskin cap brushed wide shoulders as he shook his head. The beardless lips were tight with sudden resolve as he turned abruptly to descend from the firing-ledge.

"Hey, where you going?" Old Wash faced him with climbing, grizzled brows. "Not to—"

"Yeah." Sam was already on the ground. "To let him in, if a rifle ball or arrow don't drop him before he makes the gate. After all, he's white folks."

Profane remonstrance spouted from the oldster's lips. "You'll regret it, Sam," he predicted. "I've got a feeling in my bones."

But Harney glided swiftly to unbar the big double gate or sallyport, shouting to other buckskin-clad men lounging about the compound:

"Up with you, boys, and feed 'em galena pills if they ride in range!"

THE men showed no special enthusiasm in mounting to the firing-ledge, for they had heard the name of Job Catlin spoken. Free trappers they were, with no fondness for the arrogant Catlin, who had compelled them more than once to part with a season's fur catch at his own low figure, because St. Louis, where better prices prevailed, was so far from the Arrow River trapping grounds.

Since the independent traders, Harney and Braxton, had formed partnership, the free trappers knew where to dispose of their peltry at fair valuation. A half-dozen bearded riflemen strode to support young Sam Harney, if need arose, as he swung open one side of the gate.

Sam stepped a yard or two beyond the stockade wall, percussion cap rifle lifted. Through a film of dust darted the racing rider, not yet within gun-range of the post. The smooth-bores of the Indians rapped up flat echoes, but the wildly riding white man, leading them by a narrow margin, gave no sign of being hit.

His mount, a powerful bay, was lathered, as if it had run far at a killing pace. The wiry war ponies of the Blackfeet, with pintos predominating, would have overhauled the bay in another mile.

Job Catlin vented an exultant cry as he saw the gate open. He brandished an empty rifle and prodded the bay to a last spurt with moccasined heels. Sam Harney's Hawkins pitched to shoulder-rest. Two of the Blackfeet were inching up on the bannering tail of Catlin's horse, copper-banded arms swinging back to hurl tomahawks.

At the burst of flame from Sam's gun muzzle, a mournful screech cut through the racket of hoofbeats. Earthward lunged a Blackfoot warrior. The death chant quieted as he somersaulted and lay slack.

Other rifles cracked not far from where Sam stood, and overhead the trappers fringing the palisades crashed out a full volley. All but old Wash Braxton had thrown a ball. He leaned sourly on his shooting-iron, following Job Catlin with hostile eye

as the man pounded by Harney and the six trappers, and entered the gateway.

The Blackfeet had recoiled under the lash of galena lead and were racing out of range with defiant ululations. Only four or five copper-skinned bodies draped the ground as the war party retreated, and of these one was the brave Harney had hit.

It was no reflection on the aim of the mountain men, for just so many of the plains nomads had been within hitting range of the percussion caps. Yet those who had tossed lead to the wind didn't consider it wasted. The onrush of the painted band toward the open part of the stockade had been stopped.

Harney and his supporters turned, leaped after the faltering bay as it passed beneath the wide gate beam. The huge bar thudded into iron sockets. Sam approached the spent horse and steadied Catlin as he rolled from the flat-horned saddle.

"Tight rubbing, I'd say."

Sam grounded rifle butt and keenly eyed the trader, a six-footer with a grizzly's bulk and amazing nimbleness in battle, and something of its ferocity. The tribes of the Arrow River country summed up Job Catlin's crushing power in the war name, "Iron Hand." Full-bearded, he wasn't unhandsome, clad in beaver-trimmed buckskin and Crow moccasins. The wool hat he usually wore was missing, doubtless skimmed off by bullet or arrow in his long flight.

"Soon's as I get my breath," he panted, stabbing a huge hand at his rescuer, "I'll thank you for saving my ringlets! I hoped you'd open up, Harney, but I wasn't sure. From now on it's live and let live with me. Best days of the beaver trade are dead, but there's still money in it for a few big traders. You'll be a big 'un, too, if you live long enough."

"I expect"—Sam smiled thinly, wondering if that speech had sinister import—"to live long enough."

"The Injuns ain't discouraged. Listen to 'em!" The big trader lifted his head at a sudden chorus of war cries and hoof thunder. "Crazy to charge such stout walls!"

ALONG the palisades the gun-slots smoked as the Blackfeet rode forward in a blood-stirring charge. It was but a feint, however. The charge split two ways, many yards short of the long reach of the Hawkins rifle, and the wheeling redskins howled tauntingly as they pattered back to mid-plain, waving feathered lances and smooth-bores.

Through it all the small group around Job Catlin remained intact. Enough men already were hunkered on the firing-ledge. But Wash Braxton had left it and, rifle cradled in arm-hollow, shuffled into earshot as Job was explaining the unusual sight of beholding him the object of a war party's wrath.

". . . all young bucks, under that fire-eating youngster, Horse Head. A month ago at my post he got sassy over a swap of robes for powder and ball, reached for his skull-cracker and — Well, I heaved him out the door. He's been laying to catch me outside the fort alone and today he done it . . . Howdy, there, Wash! I just been telling your pardner the hatchet's buried between us!"

"Wagh!" grunted Braxton. "Glad to hear it."

Somehow he didn't believe Catlin.

The Blackfeet were heard from no more as night fell. But the usual watch was kept from the blockhouses at the stockade corners facing westward. With the sky overcast since sundown, it was black as a pocket out on the plain and the hawk-eyed sentries failed to descry the reinforcements to Chief Horse Head's original band of thirty young scalp-hunters.

Knowing the redskins' aversion to night fighting, the guards anticipated no renewed assault until dawn—if one came at all. Treachery and danger

from within were out of their calculations, even though the majority at the post shared Wash Braxton's distrust of Job Catlin.

A hundred Blackfeet snake-bellied from mid-plain to the foot of the palisades, and not a rifle spoke in the watch-towers. The starless dark rendered those creeping, silent forms invisible. Quiet as death, Horse Head's band crouched below the twelve-foot log walls and waited for the gates to swing wide.

The sentries leaped to action at suspicious creaking sounds from the double gateway. Through the upper port-holes of the blockhouses rifles blazed at the shadowy six-foot figure darting back from the gate with the sudden rush of red men through the opening. But too late!

Angry lead buzzed about Job Catlin, yet failed to strike him. Two warriors went down instead, and the massacre that Job had cunningly plotted was on!

Awake at the first war whoop, buckskin men tumbled from their bunks inside the post to the compound, strung to wage a death-struggle. Sam Harney cursed his mistaken trust in Job Catlin as he emptied his Hawkins, sending a yelling Blackfoot flat. The ride for life had been a trick to get Catlin inside the post, so that he could open the gates for his red friends!

Sam poured powder from his horn, rammed the slug in its greased patch down the rifle barrel, and drew bead. A red warrior, charging him with a lance, bounded high. The lance shot over Sam's bent shoulder.

"So Catlin buried the tomahawk, did he?" a voice bellowed at Sam Harney's side. "Wagh! This chile's medicine told him different, but you laughed, Sam, you laughed!"

Sam was not laughing now as he faced the painted horde, with old Wash siding him. He had acted for the best, he thought, as a white man should toward one of his own race. But what a ghastly error!

All around them guns roared, the valiant battle cries of the mountain men cutting through the high-pitched yells of the Blackfeet. Blood of red and white fighter, bored by rifle-ball or tomahawked, soaked the hard-packed earth of the compound.

The trappers' soaring defiance gradually lessened in volume. They were few against many, fighting to the last chop of knife and trigger-pull. The Blackfeet's cries were tinged with triumph. This fight was yielding plenty of scalps.

"We're gone beaver, unless we break for the horses, Sam!" Wash roared in his partner's ear. "I'm cut up some, but I can still set a pony. C'mon!"

"Like to get a whack at Catlin before I show my back hair!" snarled Sam.

ONE hand gripped a tomahawk snatched from a fallen brave. Suddenly the weapon pitched forward and there was a sickening thud as it cleft the skull of a warrior circling his empty gun in mid-air to smash him down.

Wash seized his partner's arm and, limping from his wounds, drew Sam roughly toward a corner of the trading post. Behind it stood a log stable, and the Indians hadn't gone that way yet. Many of Horse Head's band, when they poured through the gateway, had lugged in armfuls of brush. Piled against the stockade, flint and steel had showered sparks into these brush heaps, and soon the walls would be a crackling inferno. Old Wash knew their only chance was to be ahorse and riding before the spreading flames lighted the interior of the doomed post with a glare fatal to its last defenders.

Sam, his blood in such a boil that he would have died fighting on the scene of disaster if let alone, permitted Braxton to drag him clear of the mêlée.

"Save your hair now and Job's day of reckoning will come!" panted the oldster. "Hump yourself, Sam! They ain't none of the varmints seen us go!"

Sam Harney responded, breaking into a run, his brain a ferment. Other trappers were dashing for the log stable as Harney and Braxton mounted horses, riding bareback, with halter-ropes in lieu of bridles there was no time to adjust.

Rifles primed for the mad gallop through the only loop-hole of escape, the fire-fringed gateway, Sam and Wash plunged forward. Past the square-built trading post, soon to burn, into the broken warrior ranks!

The percussion-cap weapons belched, bowling over redskin targets as a swarm of Blackfeet blocked the riders' path. Colt pistols flamed. More warriors toppled, with the death chant on bloody lips.

The two wild horsemen surged over the living with trampling hoofs, lying close to the necks of their mounts. Behind them a pitiful few trappers on horseback tried to cut through to the same goal, the open gateway, but the augmented red ranks closed about them irresistibly.

Job Catlin, recognizing Harney and Braxton in the yellow glare of the burning palisades, urged pursuit in his booming voice. His rifle flashed at Sam's low-lying figure—it didn't budge. Before the trader could reload, the fast-riding partners had vanished in the outer darkness.

By the time the Indians' war ponies could be brought up from mid-plain, the men Job most wanted to slay would be beyond pursuit. He cursed his luck and hurled a tomahawk at a mounted trapper desperately striving to follow Harney and Braxton into the sheltering gloom.

II

TRAVELING east, because the westward trails were certain to be swarming with scalp-hunting allies of Job Catlin, Sam Harney and his old partner eventually turned up at Fort Winslow, on the Niobrara. Suffering from wounds that were rudely bandaged, the dispossessed traders nevertheless were more racked by mental than physical pain. At one stroke of treachery their trading business had been wiped out, and good men had died back there. Sam, in large measure, blamed himself for the disaster.

"Don't take it so hard," counseled Wash, perceiving his partner's need of consolation. "How could you know of the pizen treachery in Catlin's heart, damn him! If Horse Head really had been after Job's scalp and had counted coup while you kept the gates barred, you could figure yourself responsible for his murder."

Sam nodded. "But if I'd taken heed of your hunch, Wash, or had watched him closer—it ain't the loss of our post and the trade goods, so much as the boys."

"We'll square 'em some day," Braxton cut in, and pointed ahead. "Looky yonder at Winslow, Sam. Power of wagons outside. A train for the Oregon Trail, I reckon."

Sam straightened on bare ponyback and looked. The white-tilted wagons ranked before the stockade, with the Stars and Stripes snapping in the brisk wind from the flagstaff of the fort, put heart into him. There was work to be done, with the tide of pioneering men and women rolling westward, and in helping to advance the borders of a nation, no time remained for futile regrets.

"Lot of army baggage wagons among 'em," Sam commented, noticing the "U. S. A.," painted on many wagon covers. "Might be an expedition into the Injun country, Wash, to clear the way for the emigrants. Ain't half enough army posts beyond the Platte."

As they rode on, more men wearing army blue greeted the eye than either had seen on former vsiits to the out-

post of civilization.

A multitude of felt-hatted, flannel-shirted civilians, too, who somehow didn't strike them as being the settler type. Irish, Swedes and Mexicans for the most part, and the women and children usually to be found in the caravans of pioneers were nowhere in evidence.

Harney and Wash Braxton hadn't been at the fort ten minutes before the imposing array of men and wagons was explained. A gray-mustached, sharp-eyed military man, with the shoulder-straps of a colonel, intercepted them as they led their horses across the parade ground.

"Just get in, boys?" he asked. "How's the trail out yonder? You look as if you'd had a stiff brush with hostiles and lost your saddles."

"Lucky to have our hair," replied Sam, and told him briefly of the massacre at Buckhorn Knob.

"The Arrow River country!" exclaimed the officer. "That's just where we're going. Most of all I need scouts and guides who know the territory and the tribes. I've already hired a dozen buckskin men who claim to know the Arrow from its headwaters down, but I'm not quite satisfied they're the best men obtainable. Now, you two are the sort I've had in mind. You've lived there, dealt with the Indians. How about jobs with the expedition?"

"We could use 'em," Sam admitted, "but we'd like to savvy first what you're going after."

"Quite right." The cavalry colonel nodded. "Well, then, it's an expedition to build a road for the use of the military, freight wagons and emigrant trains, and to construct a chain of forts—in short, to open up the Arrow River territory to white settlement and keep the Indians in check. There have been attempts on the Government's part to buy enough land for its purpose from the several tribes, but they refuse to talk terms. I suspect that trader who engineered the massacre at your post may have had something to do with the Indians' stubbornness. By the way, I'm Colonel Morris Northrop, in command of the expedition."

"Colonel, I'd believe any cussedness of Job Catlin," Harney declared. "You bet he'd resist a road through that country, strong as the Injuns will, because it'd mean the end of his trading, in time. Not that Blackfeet, Shoshones and Crows would need much prodding from him, though."

COLONEL NORTHROP smiled grimly. "I understand. We'll be fighting natural Indian hostility coupled with the cunning of a greedy, unscrupulous white man. But I have under my command troops of the Third and Ninth Cavalry to protect the five hundred civilian laborors who will build the road and the army posts. The workmen have their own bosses, their own boarding tents and mess. The feeding of them is supervised by Mrs. Loftus, an estimable lady who once ran a cook-shack in the California diggings. That's the line-up. You'll go?"

"For a chance to get even with Job Catlin, I'd go for half pay!" Wash Braxton asserted, smiting his rifle stock.

"Yes, count us in, Colonel," Sam said earnestly. "But we'll need some horse trappings, some powder and ball—"

"The quartermaster will supply you," Northrop told him. "First though, I think you both ought to see the surgeon. You didn't come out of that raid with whole skins exactly. . . ."

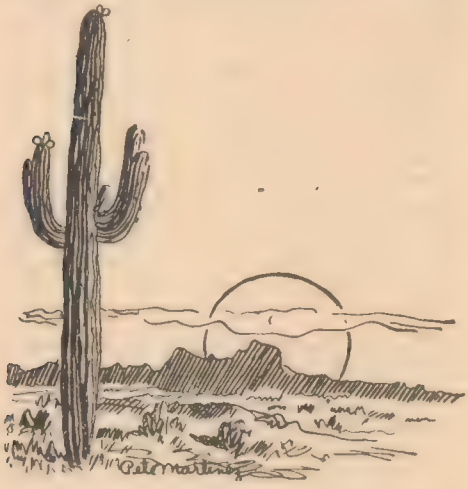
Later, the colonel introduced them to the dozen frontiersmen he had picked up to be the eyes and ears of the expedition. Sam and Wash scanned the dark-tanned faces in the hope of recognizing old friends among them, but not one was familiar. And most of them wore sullen looks when the cavalry leader announced that

Sam Harney was to be chief scout and guide.

Foremost in the buckskin ranks stood two men named Brad and Toby Jordan, brothers who bore no resemblance to each other. Brad, the elder, was tall and slim, with long blond mustache and hair. There was a touch of the dandy in his well-fitting buckskins. Toby, dark and heavily bearded, was hulking and rope-muscled. Fringes were missing from the sleeve and leg-seams of his patched and grease-smeared buckskin suit.

"I figured, Colonel," Brad Jordan said, with a frown at Harney, "to be appointed chief scout myself. I dunno as Toby and me want to take orders from this stranger."

"You'll have to suit yourselves about that, Jordan," Colonel Northrop replied coldly. "I made you no promise, and I'm convinced Harney is the best man to lead."



"'Taint fair!" grumbled Toby Jordan. "You hired we'uns first."

Lightning played in the depths of Sam Harney's gray eyes. He stepped forward.

"More than one man here looks dissatisfied about working under me," he said in a clear, ringing tone. "I'm not a hard boss if you toe the mark, but any man who feels he can't follow me had better step out now!"

He locked glances with the Jordans, not liking what he saw in the faces of either. If they went along, there would be trouble within the scouting ranks. Sam was sorry when Brad shrugged.

"After all, the colonel's the big boss," he said. "Toby and me signed for the trip. We ain't backing out now."

Assigned to the troopers' mess with the rest of the scouts, Sam and Wash had an early supper and wandered over to the workmen's camp. Under a spread of canvas seating a hundred laborers at long tables, they were surprised to see a slender, brown-haired girl, aproned and with sleeves rolled to the elbows, helping to wait on the hungry mob.

Braxton tapped his partner on the shoulder as they lingered in the entrance.

"You reckon that good-looking piece of calico is the she-boss we've been hearing the men call Ma Loftus?"

Sam laughed, but didn't remove his interested gaze from the girl passing gracefully among the tables.

"She's hardly old enough to've bossed a cook-shack in the California gold camps, is she, Wash? Sure not. Might be Mrs. Loftus's daughter."

PRESENTLY the girl came toward them, to leave the dining tent. They were conscious of a step behind, on the outside, but neither turned. Sam especially was held entranced by smiling hazel eyes, lifted to his. He snatched off coonskin cap.

"You're the new scouts Colonel Northrop has taken on?" the girl asked, pausing, empty dishes in capable hands. "I'm Mrs. Loftus's daughter, Angela. I help with the cooking and wait on tables."

"Yes'm, Miss Loftus, we've joined the expedition," Sam stammered. "Harney's my name. This old buck beaver is Wash Braxton, best shot, best tracker—"

"Here," interposed Wash, beaming at Angela, "don't you give me no repytation I can't stand up to, Sam. Pay him no mind, ma'am."

"I'm waiting, Angela!" growled a voice beyond the tent entrance.

Angela looked past the scouts. "Oh, I didn't see you, Brad. Coming." And with a friendly nod at Harney and Braxton, she glided on beneath the raised canvas flap.

Pivoting on moccasined heels, Sam and Wash watched her disappear in the nearby cook-tent, Brad Jordan stalking at her side. Braxton growled in his silvery beard.

"What's she see in a critter like him?" he demanded.

"No more'n we do, maybe," Sam said with a tightening of the lips. "Unless I'm wide of the mark, pard, Miss Loftus didn't look like she was going to meet anyone she was killing fond of."

"That Brad and Toby'll do to watch," commented the oldster, involuntarily laying hand to the tomahawk stuck in beaded belt. "Bet you a pack of beaver pelts—"

"No takers," said Sam with a hard grin. "I know trouble with the Jordans is coming to a head soon."

Braxton and Harney's hunch proved right, for trouble developed sooner than even Sam expected. First camp had been made on the southern rim of the Arrow River country. The laboring force was split up, half the men to begin grading the broad wagon road northward, at right angles to the trail already worn deep by the caravans bound for California and Oregon.

The other gangs were to travel miles ahead under cavalry escort and start fort-buildings. On a crude map he had of the region, Colonel Northrop had marked the site where he should erect the first of a half-dozen army posts.

Wagons were ready to roll again at dawn. The troops who would remain and guard the road-makers, and those detailed to penetrate the Arrow River wilderness with the colonel, slept in separate camps that night.

At a campfire close by the workmen's boarding tents, Scout Sam Harney sat on his heels and gave old Wash last instructions. Braxton, in charge of half the scouts, was to stay behind with the road-builders. Indians had been spied on distant ridges while daylight held.

"No telling," said Sam, "whether you or the colonel's outfit will be jumped first. Soon's the runners bring the tribes together, there'll be enough fighting men to tackle both our parties at once. Colonel gave orders to have entrenchments dug all around this camp, come morning. It's a wise move—"

He broke off, staring intently into the gloom over his right shoulder, as a cry split the night silence. .

Old Wash said around his pipe stem, "That wasn't no painter's squaw screech!"

"I know it!" Harney jerked out, and bounded toward the white and silent dining tent, sixty yards away.

Shod for noiseless travel, young Sam streaked over the intervening ground while the cry was repeated, half-muffled this time. He discerned two swaying figures near the closed tent door, caught a man's low, growling voice:

"There's no cause to holler, Angela! You'll fetch the camp down! I don't aim—"

Harney's blood rioted. Brad Jordan and Angela! The dandified buckskin man had stifled that cry with his hand over her mouth.

SAM'S right arm stretched out as he leaped in. Steely fingers found the fringed collar of Brad Jordan's coat. Jordan squirmed around in the grip of Harney, letting go of the girl. Brad's dipping hand closed on a knife-haft and the blade shot toward Sam's ribs. Harney felt its point bite through buckskin to flesh as he

twisted sideward, using his left fist to smash the vicious face beneath the flat-crowned hat.

Brad Jordan rocked away, lost his balance and flopped on his back. But he was up again in a minute, legs spread wide until the shock of that hammerlike blow had passed.

Sam Harney faced him, no eyes just then for the girl, breathless and supporting herself by one of the tent's guy ropes. Brad's knife had fallen in the grass. He didn't try to retrieve it, but slapped pistol butt.

"You can't steal my girl, Harney, chief scout or not!" Jordan snarled.

"I'm not his girl— Oh!" Angela recoiled, arm bent across her eyes as flame spurted from Sam's darting hand.

Jordan was spinning, his Colt lashing a slug into the ground. He crumpled forward just as Harney sensed danger on his flank. From out of the tent wall's shadow flung the unwieldy form of Toby Jordan, with lifted tomahawk.

But for the sixth sense which warned Sam, Brad's brother would have split Sam's skull from behind. Stunned by the suddenness of Toby's rush, Angela hadn't had time even to cry out.

The long-handled tomahawk hurtled through space as Sam wheeled. He dodged, but the whirling blade chopped his shoulder and, overbalanced by his sideward lunge, he slipped on the grass, fell hard. The shouts of Braxton and other scouts hurrying to the seat of combat came dully to his ears. Nearer at hand he heard Toby raving:

"You killed my brother, you—"

Sam was lying on his right side, Colt revolver under him. Toby knew where the tomahawk had struck, that it hadn't ended Harney, and he swept six-shooter from leather belt. With desperate speed, Sam rolled to the left, his teeth locked over the pain it cost him to bear down on the injured shoulder.

Toby's gun roared as Sam moved, but the bullet plowed the dirt. Against a backdrop of stars, Sam saw the younger Jordan's bulky silhouette, like an evil blot, and his uprising right hand squeezed a shot at it. Toby tottered and his knees bent. He pitched forward, firing, the slugs widely missing the scout.

Sam watched the man's body twitch, then become still, and slowly gained his feet. He reeled tentward, to be met halfway by Angela, who was tearfully anxious.

"It's nothing but a hatchet nick," he soothed her. "I'll be all right. What was Brad Jordan about, anyway?"

"He asked me to meet him here," Angela replied. "Said I was seeing too much of you. I told him to mind his business, that he had no claim on me. I never really liked him, and when he tried to kiss me—"

Sam swore. "Brad paid heavy for that. We're well rid of both Jordans!"

A voice spoke behind Harney and the girl:

"That's a job you'll have to do over, Sam. You didn't place either one of them balls center. The varmints are bad hurt, but they'll live."

Sam faced his partner. In one hand Wash held a flaming brand, snatched from the campfire as he'd loped after the chief scout.

"Let's look at those die-hards." Sam's tone was one of disgust, and the mountain men stepped off together.

By the burning wood chunk, he saw that Wash had made no mistake, and ordered the scouts standing about to carry Brad and Toby to the army surgeon's tent.

"I can't kick you out of camp the way you are," Sam said, as he fixed his stern gaze on the older Jordan's pain-convulsed face. "The Injuns would gobble you right up. But soon as you and Toby can ride, you're traveling!"

Brad's only answer was a glare of hatred.

III

AXES rang on the heavily timbered slopes of the Arrow Mountains, and alert cavalrymen sat restive mounts at strategic points on high ground, carbine butts on blue-clad thighs. For days, in the broad valley below, the first of the army posts had been under construction, and though scouting Indians were seen, there had been no attack.

In Sam Harney's opinion, the tribes were waiting to gather in overwhelming numbers, aiming to crush the invaders at one sweeping blow.

Attended by his scouts, he was away from the tented camp most of the time, keeping an eye on the villages of Blackfeet, Shoshones and Crows, and on Job Catlin's trading post. Near noon of that sun-drenched morning one of the outposts sighted buckskin riders heading over the ridges at a pace which spelled trouble. Presently the leading horseman was in shouting range of troopers and timber cutters.

"Back to the fort, on the double-quick!" Sam Harney roared. "The Injuns are piling this way, an army of 'em!"

A bugle blared, the sounds of chopping and of falling timber ceased, and the workmen rushed pell-mell for the wagons half-filled with logs. Whips cracked, wheels began to turn as the cavalry closed in at the rear, Sam and his buckskin riders mingling with the soldiers.

As they approached the fort on the run, the workmen there discarded tools for rifles. Part of the stockade and one blockhouse was completed—enough of a log barricade to give troopers and civilians confidence in resisting the long-awaited onslaught. Colonel Northrop, with saber clanking, met Sam as he swung from saddle.

"A big war party, eh?" greeted the officer. "In a way I'm glad the suspense is over."

"Biggest I ever saw," replied the scout, trailing his horse behind as they walked through the gateway. "Warriors from all the tribes, with Job Catlin and some of his trappers. The war drums have been booming every night in the upper country."

"Well, we're ready!" Northrop said grimly.

He and the chief scout mounted the half-completed firing-ledge to watch for the first wave of war bonnets and feathered lances above a barren ridge in the northwest. The bustle of preparation for battle went on within the quadrangular fort site. Wagons rumbled into a defensive circle, the unhitched teams and cavalry mounts were bunched and tied where the best shelter offered.

"There they come!" Sam Harney flung his long arm ridgeward.

The colonel, after one look at the lines of red pony riders topping the ridge crest and ambling down, turned to shout orders at his captain and lieutenants who, in turn, barked at the tense troopers.

The blue-clad figures swung to the firing-ledge, and through every gun slot a carbine barrel was thrust. Lacking sufficient loop-holes, some were leveled atop the wall, resting between the pointed log ends.

Sam Harney stood up to his gunwork beside the colonel, scanning the mass of hooting horsemen for a particular target—a bearded white man in beaver-trimmed buckskin. Job Catlin wasn't hard to locate. He rode in the front rank with a score of trappers, all as avid as the trader himself to preserve this unproductive wilderness for the waning fur trade.

The steadily advancing ranks of red cavalry were whipped to sudden whirlwind action by the lance-flourished signals of the war chiefs. Blackfoot, Crow and Shoshone charged the log barrier, shooting with smoothbores, with bows and arrows. The weapons of the trappers crashed as they swept along in the van.

Sam Harney's long Hawkins pitched up. He sighted on Job Catlin, the memory of that night of massacre steadying his aim. But the trader, as though sensing he was beaded by a deadly eye, swung low on the big bay's neck. Sam's bullet lifted a Shoshone brave clear of his saddle-pad, flung him under the hoofs of war ponies racing from the rear.

The lead-and-arrow shower, spatting on the stockade wall or skimming the top with an ominous humming, drove Sam and Colonel Northrop to their knees on the ledge. An erect soldier or two, not so quick to drop, hurtled backward to the ground with agonized cries. But the carbines were rattling death into the eagle-feathered ranks at the shouted order to "Fire!" Some of the unhorsed warriors sprawled within a few yards of the deep-sunken logs.

SAM, with rifle reloaded, peeped over the stockade as the pony hoofs thundered retreat from that blizzard of smoky lead. He spied Catlin running with the rest, bent over while he rodded home a fresh charge. Job glanced back just as Harney's coonskin cap, with steel-chip eyes beneath, lifted above the sharpened logs. He yelled recognition of his enemy, twisted in the saddle for a quick shot.

Sam drew bead with the trader's gun smoking at him. He saw Catlin lurch, and a yell of triumph sped to his lips. But he stifled it as Job righted himself and fled on in the stampede of red horsemen. A twinge of pain caused Sam to put hand to cheek, and he felt the blood-moist furrow left by a swiping bullet.

"Iron Hand's a good shot," he remarked to the colonel, who had risen beside him. "Little more to center and he'd've got me. They'll come again, Colonel, and it won't be long."

Nor was it, despite the great number of motionless and still writhing bodies of warriors and war ponies dotting the field. Forms in trapper garb lay among them, for Catlin's buckskin men hadn't skulked behind their red allies when the charge thundered up to the walls of the half-finished fort.

As before, line after line of screeching bronze figures swept across the level, spreading death by bullet and arrow in the blue-coated firing line. Eager workmen climbed up to fill gaps along the edge.

When the right wing of the red cavalry swerved to circle the unfinished portion of the palisades, the riflefire of men stationed inside the forted wagons implied many empty saddle-pads. A few work horses broke loose in their terror and joined the rush of Indian ponies.

But finally the dust storm stirred by pounding, unshod hooves subsided, and the incessant crack of musketry thinned to a few parting shots. Men looked at one another with strained eyes, rubbed sweating faces with powder-grimed hands and asked, "Will they come again?" The last assault had all but broken through.

"If I had the men," Colonel Northrop said to his chief scout, gazing at the painted legion as it milled colorfully on the distant ridge slopes, "I'd move out in a counter-charge."

"But," replied Sam, binding up a crimsoned arm, "you ain't got the men—not half enough. Only rawhide guts and these walls kept us from going under. Yet I figure they've about shot their wad. The Injuns, you know, don't see any fun in fighting when they lose heavy. And we sure killed a-plenty."

The cavalry leader nodded, scrubbed his chin. "If they come at us again, it'll be because of Catlin's urging. He and his trappers were conspicuous in the fighting."

"Oh, Job's no coward, come to that," declared Sam. "Nor his buckskin men, either. Too bad I couldn't throw him. Saved us a lot of future trouble."

"Look there!" Colonel Northrop's grip fell on the scout's uninjured arm.

"If that isn't Catlin riding in under a flag of truce—"

"So 'tis!" Sam picked up the Hawkins leaning against the logs, then put the weapon down. "Huh! Can't swap lead with him while he's toting that thing! Wants to powwow, I reckon."

Scout and cavalry officer stood up in plain view as the lone rider loped on down and checked the bay at long rifle range. High above his wool hat, the protective strip of buckskin dangled from the Hakins' barrel.

"You on the wall there!" he boomed. "The shoulder-strapper, not that skunk-bit longhair!"

"Colonel Northrop's my name!" shouted the officer. "What have you to say?"

"I want you to take your Long Knives, timber cutters and the rest, and clear out of Arrow country!" roared Catlin. "Better hit the road while it's open or you'll stay here a long time. I stand shoulder to shoulder with my Injun friends!"

"You can't stop the march of the pioneers, Catlin!" retorted the colonel. "And you're only showing yourself up as a renegade, an outlaw, by attempting it!"

"He's thinking of his fur trade more'n what the Injuns stand to lose!" Harney commented in a loud voice, and reached once more for his long gun. "Drop that flag of truce, Job, and I'll give you first shot!"

Catlin ignored the challenge. "I've made my talk, Northrop! Save your scalps by getting out, or be mule-jawed and have 'em decorating the tribes' lance heads!"

He whirled the bay and pounded back to the waiting red men.

WHILE daylight lasted there was no renewal of attack, and Harney believed they'd have respite from fighting until the following dawn, at least. During the night an alarm was sounded that the tribesmen were stalking the stockade, braving the superstition that death coming in the dark hours consigned those slain to an eternity of night.

But before powder and bullet were wasted, Sam Harney convinced the taut-nerved commander that the Indians were only removing the fallen from the battlefield.

Every man stood at his post in the gray dawn, peering for a glimpse of the painted horde they expected to dash from the shadows with blood-chilling whoops. The silence was unbroken, and as the sun came up, the questing eyes of the white men saw valley bottom and ridges swept clean of warriors and renegades.

"Gone!" exclaimed Sam Harney, relaxing. "They had enough of trying to dig us out of here. But don't be fooled, Colonel. They aim to stop us, one way or another, and the chiefs will look to Job Catlin to bring 'em victory. Reckon I'd better mosey along and try out that plan of capturing Job we talked over last night."

Colonel Northrop nodded slowly. "It's hazardous, Scout, but I have full confidence in you. Remember, I'd rather you took Catlin alive than dead. The Indians apparently believe he is big medicine, and he may prove a useful hostage."

Sam gazed moodily at the empty valley floor. "Me and Wash swore to stretch his pelt for the Knob massacre. That old score'll have to wait, though. Can't hold up the road and the forts that mean safety to thousands of home-hungry pioneers!"

He had breakfast and departed southward. Roving bands of hostiles, detached from the larger war party, delayed the young mountain man's arrival at the road-makers' camp until late afternoon. Wash Braxton, rifle in hand, sprang over the earthworks defending the camp as Sam quit a timber stand and loped across the open. When the oldster learned of the fighting he had missed at the stockade, he pulled a long face.

Sam chuckled, clapped him on the

back. "Don't be sore at your luck, Wash. We've got a little business up north and that's mighty likely to end in a hair-raise. Ain't the redskins bothered you at all?"

"This morning's the first time we've sighted a real sizable party of 'em," Braxton informed him. "Catlin was along, and two of the war chiefs—Big Cloud and Conquering Bear. Some of the same bunch you battled. They must've made a night ride from the valley. But these here earthworks seemed to discourage 'em—or maybe 'twas the licking they got yesterday. Anyways, we didn't have much of a scrap. They been gone for hours—I know somebody besides me who'll be particular glad to see you, Sam."

Harney grinned. "Miss Angela? Fine girl, Wash. How're the Jordans coming along?"

"'Bout ready to be turned loose. What's this business calling us north, now?"

When Sam had told him, Braxton shot his coonskin cap into the air and roared his approval. Harney wanted four in the party, and at the scouts' campfire that night selected stocky, broad-faced Dade Rafferty and a lank Missourian to go along.

While they discussed ways and means of laying Trader Catlin by the heels, the stooped figures of two listening men merged with the outer darkness. Brad and Toby Jordan, outcasts of the pioneering expedition, finally beat a stealthy retreat to their tent, and in more sanguine mood than they had been since Harney's bullets laid them low.

"Kick us out, will they?" chuckled Brad, at a safe distance from the campfire. "Well, we play even and get new jobs to boot! Catlin will sure hire us for toting him warning. The girl goes, too."

His hulking brother scowled in the dark.

"I don't favor that, Brad! She'll raise a rumpus like—"

"Not this time she won't!" gritted Brad. "You leave it to me and keep your face shut."

IV

IT WAS a wild-eyed Ma Loftus who barged into the scouts' camp a trifle after dawn.

"Fine watchmen you are, the lot of you, to be guarding a camp!" she stormed. "Here's Angela gone from her tent during the night, and not one of you long-haired Injun killers knowing she was took, I'll be bound! Scatter out and find her!"

Sam Harney dropped the frying pan he was holding over the coals. With the other scouts he surrounded the buxom Mrs. Loftus and fired questions. She knew nothing except that the girl was absent from camp, and of course Angela wouldn't have wandered off into the wilderness alone.

"The Jordans!" Sam said abruptly. "If they've slipped away, Angela's with them. Wish I'd been on guard duty last night!"

He flung away in search of Brad and Toby. They were not to be found, and the tracks of three horses at the rear of Angela Loftus's little tent were sign easily read.

When a trooper informed him of having noticed the Jordan brothers in the vicinity of the scouts' campfire, Sam realized that the plan for his big coup had been overheard. It wasn't hard to guess the outcasts' design.

Four buckskin riders, towing a neck-roped mustang, left the road camp in less than an hour. The Jordans had blinded their trail, but the pursuers were practically certain of the line of flight.

Sam and his trail-mates ate up the wilderness miles, with eyes skinned for hostiles as well as for the buckskin kidnapers. To prevent the Jordans from reaching Fort Lancehead, Catlin's stronghold, was next in importance to rescuing Angela, and the horses weren't spared.

"Not knowing we're after 'em,"

Sam said to his companions as they shoved the wind, "I'm hoping the skunks will stop to rest their mustangs and—"

The echoing crack of a Hawkins gun cut him short, the ball kicking up dust in front of his mount's driving forelegs. Sam tugged rein so violently that his horse sat on his tail and slid. Four long rifle barrels glistened in the sun, pointing at the curl of smoke issuing from a patch of woods to the left. But the frontiersmen held fire as Sam held up his hand.

"Wait!" he ordered. "Angela will be in there, tied to a tree. They'll be using her for a shield. Wash, you and Rafferty ride to flank 'em. Sube and me will go straight toward them, but slow. They might pitch a shot into her at the last."

The rifles in the woods crashed again as the pursuers split into pairs. Harney and Sube, the Missourian, could see only the girl, lashed wrist and ankle to a tree trunk, when a hundred yards had been covered at a wary trot. The shooting had ceased.

"I bet you they've skedaddled!" exclaimed the chief scout, eyes keenly searching the underbrush rearward of the girl. "Scared to meet us."

Rifles ready to spout flaming death, the buckskin men drew nearer the timber patch. Angela called out in a voice which was barely audible over a seventy-yard interval and slumped suddenly, her head dropping forward.

"Fainted, I reckon!" Sam cried, on an anxious note. "She said they've gone, Sube—come on!" And he kicked his mount into a gallop.

Braxton and Rafferty returned empty-handed while Sam was reviving Angela with water from an army canteen. Their mounts evidently well-rested from the night ride, the Jordans had sneaked off while Harney and Sube were making cautious advance, getting a lead that Wash and his companion couldn't reduce without a long, stern chase.

"Didn't know as you'd want us to get separated, and we might've had to run 'em clear to Lancehead," Wash ended his report. "They'll put Job on his guard, but what's the odds? We'll trap him anyway. How's the gal, Sam?"

ANGELA, sitting up on the ground at that moment, answered for herself. She was worn, hollow-eyed, but unharmed, and the scouts listened grimly to the tale of her capture in the night. Brad's hand at her throat had wakened her, then Angela had known nothing until she came to in a jolting saddle, tied to it, with the renegade brothers riding on either side.

Sam drew her gently to her feet, and the others turned away. Old Wash's beard was twitching. He was going to lose a pard one of these days, but it was time Sam got himself a wife.

"Here, Missouri!" Harney called to the lanky Sube. "You're cut out of the raiding party to escort the little lady back to the road camp. Can't take her with us. And watch sharp for redskins, Sube."

"I'm plumb honored," Sube said chivalrously. Yet he looked as though he would rather have headed north.

The horse ridden by Angela had been left behind by the Jordans. As Sam lifted her to the saddle, the girl clung to his fringed sleeve, hazel eyes softly pleading.

"Come back safe, Sam Harney," she said. "I know the mission you're going on. The Jordans talked about it, said you'd never—"

"Don't you believe 'em, Angela!" Harney's grin was reassuring. "I'll be thinking of you waitin' for me at end of the trail."

Until the girl and Sube were over the first rise southward, Sam stood watching them, somber-eyed. No fresh Indian sign had been noticed as they had pursued the Jordans to this patch of woods, but that was no guarantee Sube and his charge would get by unmolested. Hoping for the

best, Sam turned to shove moccasined foot in wooden stirrup. With Wash riding at his side and Rafferty fetching up the rear with the led horse designed to carry the trader as a captive, Harney faced into the north.

Huge bonfires flared brightly, backlighting leaping, yelling figures as the three scouts approached the high stockade of Catlin's trading post, called by its owner Fort Lancehead. Close by the walls, and stretching away into the gloom of the river bank, rose the buffalo hide lodges of Blackfeet, Shoshones and Crows.

At Sam's silent signal, all dismounted, gripping bridle reins short. From brush covert, three pairs of slitted eyes roved the turbulent camps.

"That's no war dance," Sam whispered. "They're boiling drunk. Job must've tapped a few kegs of trade whisky to make 'em forget their losses."

"Yeah, damn him!" snarled Wash. "It won't make things any easier for us."

"You're wrong, pard," Harney disagreed. "A spreeing Injun's got to tank up till he drops, and in a mob like that I'm not likely to be noticed so much. What I need is Injun fixings."

"You ain't going in alone!" Braxton objected fiercely.

"I am," insisted Harney. "To get the lay of the land—locate Catlin. You didn't figure we could ride right up and grab him, did you?"

Sam Harney had misjudged the reason for the big drunk of the allied tribes. It wasn't to allay the bitter sting of defeat, but instead was an anticipative celebration of the victory promised by the trader.

Job Catlin had perceived that the invaders could hold their own in either fort or road camp. But, by separating the workmen from the cavalry, the strength of the expedition would be weakened, and if the soldiers could be drawn into ambush, the white man's road would be doomed to failure.

At a council of the chiefs, the trader had won acclaim with a cunning proposition. In his possession were some gold nuggets, mementoes of a mining venture that had pinched out. Gold had lured men to destruction before, and Catlin was sure its magic would not fail him and the red tribes now.

Two of his trappers were to display the nuggets at the half-finished fort and the road camp, saying that they came from a certain gulch northwest of the Arrow, and that more could be had by just picking them off the ground. A stampede of the workmen should result.

THE trappers, with their false tale of a strike, were already on the southward trail when Sam Harney and his pards halted to view the carousing red men.

The problem now was how to secure Indian trappings for Sam, and an hour of waiting for one of the staggering figures to pass their shelter wore the chief scout's patience thin. From continuous swilling of the raw trade whisky, many of the Indians were pointing moccasins skyward in a stupor. Finally Harney spoke abruptly.

"Got to move closer in or we'll be wasting the night here," he said. "I mean just me, pards—watch!"

Sam sank on all fours, crept away through the buffalo grass. He left his rifle behind as a needless incumbrance. The Colt .44 revolver and tomahawk at his belt would serve his stealthy purpose. The scout had no intention of crossing the rim of firelight or getting too near the red men still on their feet.

Fifty yards he crawled, body flat as a catamount stalking prey, then he paused. Within striking range of his long arm, a Shoshone sub-chief had pitched down as his legs turned rubbery. Blanket folds dropped away from his shoulders, and the redskin

nodded. Lower and lower sank the bonneted head. The soft rustling of the grass nearby meant nothing to the whisky-drugged Shoshone.

Sam rose carefully on the support of his left arm, his right hand swinging Colt barrel at the bowed head. Steel-smitten, the sub-chief flattened out, making no sound except a dull thud. No other Indians were in the immediate vicinity to see or hear, and Sam began a retrograde movement, dragging his prize by a limp arm.

Old Wash was waiting with tomahawk unslung.

"Skull cracking's the easiest way to keep this varmint quiet!" he said huskily. "Whyn't you do it yourself?"

"No!" Harney seized the hairy wrist. "Not while he's knocked out, Wash! Tie and gag him. I've got what I want."

Sam stripped away war bonnet, blanket and the paint bag at the chief's belt, then Rafferty gave the grumbling Wash a hand with the senseless prisoner. With his long black hair and skin dark as any Indian's, all Harney needed was the addition of red and yellow war paint to pass muster; that is, if not too closely observed. Shortly, he was ready for the desperate venture.

"Don't move till you hear from me," he instructed his friends.

"If shooting-irons start talking, we'll come on the run," replied Wash. "Wagh! I'm half-froze for a mix-up! Remember Catlin's on his guard, and watch out for them Jordan coyotes."

Sam quit the brush in upright position. Once again he had left his rifle with his friends, for two reasons. Rum usually had a murderous effect on Indians, and it was their custom when indulging in a drinking bout to leave lethal weapons under guardianship of sober warriors. The safety measure prevented quarrels from ending tragically.

Sam, in impersonating one of their members, didn't wish to attract undue notice by carrying his Hawkins. Besides, if fighting climaxed his venture it should be at close quarters, where a long rifle was awkward. The red Hudson Bay blanket not only served as a partial hood but, held together in front, hid the broad leather belt holding Colt, Green River knife and tomahawk.

Harney staggered a little as he neared a group of shouting red men in the full glow of a fire. They appeared not to notice him, and he reeled on, making for the stockade gate. The scout couldn't help the feeling that his hair fit loosely as he mingled with the drunken mob in the compound.

Two Crow warriors barged into him by accident, and with an angry grunt, he thrust them aside. It was the safest thing to do, though he wished to avoid a wrangle. Before the Crows had recovered their balance, his blanket-shrouded figure was lost sight of among other quarreling tribesmen.

Across the threshold of the post glided Sam, finding himself in the crowded trading room. Here Catlin's clerks were passing tin cups of whisky, dipped from kegs with stove-in heads, to eagerly reaching redskins.

SAM kept his head down in the glare of the lanterns, eyes roving over the clamorous pack. Catlin and the Jordan brothers weren't in evidence, and the scout inched along a side wall toward the rear.

Well-acquainted with the layout of the post, he knew that Catlin had his office and living quarters in a room at the back. He pinned gaze on the closed door. Reeling toward it, his strained ears caught the rumble of voices through the half-log panels—Catlin's and Brad Jordan's!

Sam glanced sharply at the drunken crowd. He wasn't being watched, and the Indians were making so much noise themselves that any sounds of a disturbance on the farther side of the door probably would not be heard in the trading room. He must chance it, anyway.

The next moment he was pushing on the unbarred door, entering a smoke-clouded room with a window at the side. He shut the door, reaching behind him to slip the short bar in place and lock out interference, but his eyes never left the room's three occupants. Catlin was slouched in a chair behind a rude table, the Jordan brothers standing before him.

All three turned their gaze upon the intruder, and even Job was deceived for an instant.

"My red brother enters a council room without invitation," he called harshly. "It is not—"

"Throw the rummy loafer out on his ear!" growled hulking Toby Jordan.

Brad said nothing. He was peering intently at the painted face beneath the war bonnet. He noted the gray eyes of the intruder, eyes that should have been dusky.

"It's the scout!" he shouted. "It's Sam Harney!"

Sam's blanket fell as his hands moved lightninglike, gripping knife haft and handle of tomahawk. He had planned his action in the short time he had been mistaken for a Shoshone chief. Do up the renegade Jordans, slam Catlin senseless and tote him off by way of the side window.

Job heaved erect with a startled curse. But Brad and Toby were between him and the scout.

Brad hauled at his revolver and the long barrel swung up. But the hammer didn't rise. Brad's finger was dead on the trigger before he could squeeze it. Sam's tomahawk spun at short, deadly range, and Brad tilted forward, cleft from hair line to chin.

He hadn't struck the floor when Sam, body bent and weaving, closed with Toby whose butcher knife, held by the tip of the blade as he flung it, shaved Harney's brown cheek. Then Toby cried out in agony as swift steel in a relentless hand was driven to the hilt above his belt.

Followed a gush of crimson over his greasy buckskin shirt and he broke at the knees, clutching belted Colt with no power to draw it.

Sam Harney leaped across the sinking figure, six-shooter aimed at Job Catlin. The trader, unarmed when the disguised scout had entered, now had seized his Colt from where it lay on the wall bunk. He pivoted, eyes blazing, to face his agile enemy's .44 muzzle.

"Colonel Northrop wants you alive, Job," barked Harney, "but I'll take you dead if I must!"

"So the Jordans just told me!" Catlin's speech was quiter than usual. He was at his deadliest when he toned down that roaring voice. "Harney, I'm too big a chaw for your jaws!"

V

CATLIN squatted suddenly, firing as he hunkered down. But Sam Harney sprang onto the table top like a cat. He had read some tricky purpose in the trader's eyes and had leaped in time. He didn't pause, but jumped from the far table edge, striking Catlin's right shoulder with bent knee before the surprised Job could change position.

Job fell sideward, with Sam top dog, raining blows with Colt barrel. Catlin's skull was hard, protected by thick, curly hair which hung down over his ears to shoulder level, and the reserve powers of the man called Iron Hand were enormous. He roared, and tried to fling the scout off by arching his back.

Sam became conscious of battering strokes on the trade room side of the door, but he dared not shift his attention until he had whipped Catlin senseless. The door trembled violently, crashed open as the bar split in the sockets. There was a rush of mocmasined feet.

Sam put all his might into a downward slash and Catlin's resistance faded away. But in the same instant, the flat side of a tomahawk connected

with the back of Harney's head. He was hurled against the bunk, his clutch on his revolver loosening.

A girl's scream made him fight back from the threatening gulf of oblivion. He struggled upward on shaking legs, but hands gripped him cruelly on either side. With head whirling, he sought the source of that outcry, and his heart became a leaden lump when he saw Angela across the room, held by war-painted braves as he was being held by two more, all of them Blackfeet.

Harney had supposed that drunken Indians and Catlin trappers had broken in upon hearing the shot. But these warriors were not drunk. And there was Angela, a prisoner!

"You!" Sam gasped.

"I thought they'd killed you," Angela replied through ashen lips. "Sam, a war party headed us off only two miles from camp. Sube—died bravely. They— Oh, it's too horrible to talk about!"

Catlin was dazedly picking himself off the floor. A tall warrior padded to his assistance, speaking in gutturals. The trader asked in the Blackfoot tongue:

"You got the girl? That is good medicine! Lame Elk and his braves shall have the trade goods I promised for her safe delivery to me."

He dropped heavily into a chair, blood trickling down either bearded cheek, and looked at the girl, then at the hot-eyed scout.

"Appears like I win all around, Harney!" he rumbled, his eyes venomous. "Told you I was too big—"

"You planned this white girl's capture?" snapped Sam.

Catlin nodded, his gaze reverting to Angela.

"Saw her watching the skirmish when we were down at the road camp yesterday and offered fifty dollars in trade good to the bucks who could fetch her here. I want a wife, a white wife. She fills the bill. Don't be afraid, my dear!" He grinned widely, wiping some of the blood from his face with a buckskin sleeve. "You're not in a mite of danger. As for your friend, Mr. Harney, no doubt he expects to be tortured, but I've a reason for keeping him alive. At least, for a few days!"

Puzzled as to the trader's meaning then, Sam was still puzzled after he had fretted through nearly a week of captivity, thong-tied and alone in a windowless, log-walled room of Catlin's post. Twice a day he was fed by a scar-faced trapper, who would say nothing of where Angela was confined or how she fared—in fact, rebuffed every question put by the worried scout.

Sam, unable to liberate himself, relied on ultimate assistance from Wash Braxton and Dade Rafferty if they still retained their freedom. As time went by, he heard nothing to indicate they had been captured or slain, yet they didn't show up.

Sam guessed the reason for that. Probably impossible for either to get near the post. And all of Braxton's and Rafferty's skill at dodging and hiding would be called upon to evade capture.

Aware that Harney had comrades close by, because of the Jordan brothers' warning, Catlin had personally led the search for them. But Wash and Dade, having seen the girl pass by in the midst of Lame Elk's war party, had realized the fat was in the fire, and that they needn't look for Sam's return that night.

THEY shifted ground before their brush covert was beaten thoroughly by trappers and Indians, yet did not desert the neighborhood of Fort Lancehead. If Sam and the girl were alive, they must have help—help that the two scouts were better able to give them than a squadron of cavalry.

On the morning of the sixth day, Sam Harney looked up with brooding eyes as Job Catlin entered his prison room and left the door ajar.

"We're riding," announced the big

trader, bending over to slice Sam's ankle rawhides. "Don't ask where."

Sam didn't. He had difficulty in standing, after his legs had been so long strapped. He stumbled to the compound with Catlin holding to his bound arms, and cast sun-dazzled eyes left and right for a glimpse of Angela.

He saw her as they neared the gate, the central figure of a group of flint-eyed trappers, leaning on their guns. Her guards, without doubt. She appeared no worse than could have been expected of one confined against her will, Sam perceived. Her spirit was unbroken. Their eyes met as Harney and his captor passed by, and Angela smiled bravely. Sam returned the smile. Catlin was witness to the by-play.

"I had her brought out a-purpose," he said, with a wolfish grin, "so you could have your last look at each other. She's a mite stubborn about marrying me, Harney—seems to favor you. But you'll not be back this way!"

Outside the stockade, rank upon rank of red horsemen met the captive scout's gaze. Like figures of bronze they sat their pad-saddles, gleaming lances thrust toward the sun, eagle feathers fluttering. Sam noticed squaws on horseback, and thought at first the tribes might be breaking camp. But no, the lodges still stood where he had last seen them.

A trapper led up horses for Catlin and Harney. As they mounted, the war chiefs, Big Cloud, Conquering Bear and Bent Arm, galloped along the front lines of their respective tribesmen, shouting and tossing their lances.

Almost with the precision of white cavalry executing a similar evolution, the eagle-plumbed riders dissolved their long ranks, some wheeling one way, some another. They were separating into two bands.

One rode northwest, the other southward, and with the former went Catlin, the lone white scout, and the chattering squaws.

Harney's mystification increased as the miles reeled back. Apparently this was a war party, yet heading away from the fort and the road camp. In the foothills of the Arrow River Mountains, reached at noon, the red ranks halted. Scouts had been outriding for some time. They returned on the run, palavered with Catlin and the chiefs.

Sam got an inkling of what was afoot then. The trader yanked the lead rope of Harney's mount and broke into a gallop, Big Cloud, Conquering Bear and Bent Arm keeping pace with him. The warriors and squaws came on more slowly.

On the rim of a deep gulch, the foremost riders checked rein and peered down, Sam as eagerly as the rest. For a moment, the scout was stricken speechless by what he saw.

Flannel-shirted men with pack animals were trailing into the gulch. A few of the earliest arrivals had set up tents in the gulch bottom and were frenziedly scratching its rocky surface with pickaxes. They looked familiar, those men and their excavating tools.

"A gold strike!" Harney found his voice.

Catlin lounged in the saddle and eyed him malevolently. "So they think, Harney. Yeah, it's the workmen from the fort and the road camp."

He told then of the nuggets he had employed as bait, and Sam cursed him and his crafty scheme.

"The soldiers couldn't stop 'em from coming," Catlin glinted, "because they're civilians, not subject to army discipline. They won't find any gold in that gulch bottom, only graves. The Injuns are surrounding 'em right now and the fools don't know it."

Harney followed the trader's pointing finger. Dismounted warriors were swarming through boulder fields and scrub timber outside the rocky alley, to enclose the would-be miners, and to strike when the signal was given.

SAM'S face was twisted with fury. He cried:

"You cunning devil!"

"I wanted you to see how your expedition's bound to fail, before you die!" Catlin leered. "Not a man of the invaders will escape. Moggins and Dacer, the trappers who stampeded the workmen, rode south with the other war party. They're to carry word to the soldiers at fort and road camp that the deserters are besieged. Of course, the troops'll start to the rescue—but they'll ride into a trap, miles from here. It'll be a great scalp harvest!"

In desperation, Sam Harney kicked his mount to the end of the rope held by Catlin. The horse brought up with a jerk, its forehoofs on the brink of the steep gulch wall, and Sam's voice floated down.

"Grab guns, you gold-mad fools!" he roared. "The redskins are coming!"

He saw the startled faces of workmen raised to his, heard the war whoop ring out suddenly. Then a smashing blow from behind nearly knocked him off his horse. . . .

Sam drifted back to consciousness of a pain-split head and wondered a little at being alive. Darkness was coming on. He lay on the rock-ribbed ground, tightly bound, and before him, leaning on a lance, stood a stalwart Blackfoot. The warrior was looking toward the gulch, where the yells of white men and red mingled, and guns crashed recurrent volleys.

Sam thought, The fool gold hunters are holding on, but what real chance have they?

He'd given up hope of Braxton and Rafferty ever coming to his aid, and his helplessness was the more galling when he thought of Angela being left to her fate at Fort Lancehead, of Colonel Northrop's cavalry riding into an ambuscade of death.

Sam judged that he had been reserved for torture until Catlin and his red allies had more time to devote to that pleasing diversion. He writhed a little testing the buckskin thongs. The Blackfoot turned and savagely jabbed him with the lance point, and Sam quieted, cursing his plight.

Flat on his back he watched the stars stud the darkened sky. Just before the fighting at the gulch ceased until the following dawn, he sensed the nearness of other men. He shifted so that his left ear touched the earth. Someone was creeping toward him, and he knew it couldn't be an Indian. There was no reason for a warrior to approach in such stealthy fashion.

Presently two buckskin-clad figures slithered forward over the rocks, one on either side of him. Sam could hardly believe his eyes when he recognized Wash and Dade. Despite their caution, low scuffing sounds they made warned Sam's guard. He whirled with lifted lance. There was a sickening thud as Wash Braxton's right arm swung, releasing tomahawk. The warrior's yell died in his throat, and the rescuers picked up Sam, neck and heels.

Half a mile away, in an alder thicket, they put him down and cut the buckskin lashings. And while Sam rubbed his arms and legs to get the blood circulating, Wash related how he and Dade had awaited this chance for days. That morning they had followed him from Fort Lancehead, regretting that the number of Catlin trappers left behind at the post had made it unfeasible for them to release Angela Loftus. They didn't know who was standing off the Indians in the gulch, and when Sam told them, they rocked backward on moccasined heels in amazement.

"There's more to tell, about a trap planned for the cavalry," Harney said, rising. "I can tell it on the way to Lancehead. We've got to rescue Angela first, and if the luck don't turn, we may save the troopers—that my Hawkins you have there, Wash?"

"Sure." The oldster passed it to him. "Your horse waits with ours."

The three men rode furiously through the night, away from the diminishing sounds of the gulch battle. Sam opined—and the others agreed—that Catlin had left his trappers at the fort because the red war parties were in sufficient force to do the fighting, or else he feared an attack on Lancehead if troopers broke through the ambush.

HALF the night was gone, yet there were sounds of revelry within the post, and the gate stood wide when Sam and his pards checked rein beyond the stockade.

"Whelps'll play while the he-wolf's away," growled Wash. "D'you reckon we can hack a path through 'em?"

Sam shook his head. "Too dangerous for Angela." He rubbed an ear thoughtfully, eying the tepees around the post! A brisk wind was sweeping from the west, and abruptly he spoke. "Them lodges are all deserted. The squaws are up watching the gulch fight, aiming to plunder the dead and stone the wounded, after it's over. Wouldn't it be the trick now to draw out them trappers if we set fire to that Injun village?"

Wash and Dade looked at their young comrade admiringly and voiced approval. Next moment the trio were riding at a walk toward the dark and silent tepees. Hastily gathered pine knots, touched off with flint and steel, furnished them with torches. Separating, the scouts darted in and out of lodge doors, until flames rising from the upper end of the village were casting ruddy reflection on bastions and palisades.

Inside the trading post lifted the frenzied cry of "Fire!" and dark forms poured through the open gateway. The high wind was driving the fire against the stockade, and Catlin's men knew he would be in murderous humor should the post be destroyed.

They weren't particularly concerned about saving their red allies' property, but the threat to Fort Lancehead sent some of the buckskin band charging to strike lodges in the path of the fire, while others hurriedly formed a bucket bridgade from the river bank.

While they fought the conflagration, utterly mystified as to its origin, three men in buckskin quietly mounted waiting horses and passed through the unguarded sallyport.

The compound was deserted, but as Sam and his pards approached the doorway of the main building, voices inside, loudly arguing the cause of the fire, warned them of trouble ahead.

"Some of Angela's guards, likely," said Harney in a low tone, swinging down. "Sticking close to her, per Catlin's orders, but I don't reckon they suspect rescuers are prowling round. Dade, you stay with the mustangs. Watch the gate and cut loose if anyone shows up there. We'll hear you. Come on, old beaver!"

Wash shuffled to his side, and with fringed shoulders almost touching, they walked into the trading room. Four trappers were leaning on the plank counter; a clerk stood behind it. And the clerk saw the pards first. He leveled an arm and yelled before he ducked:

"Harney and Braxton!"

VI

WHIRLING together, Catlin's trappers snatched up rifles that rested against the counter. But two good Hawkins guns already covered them, and spoke in crashing harmony. One man pitched on his face, his heavy fall jarring the room; another folded across the counter, his fur cap dropping on the cowering clerk.

Harney dived forward as a third trapper was beading him. The scout's empty rifle lashed sideward, for there wasn't time to pitch the hatchet he'd found in a tepee. The hard-swung gun-barrel hit the straight-aimed one as flame jetted from its muzzle. The ball tore into the log wall and Harney's tomahawk, impelled by his left

hand, knocked the renegade backward and down. Old Wash's Green River blade tallied the fourth man in the same instant.

Sam vaulted the plank counter, to drive forth the terrified clerk. But a feminine voice, calling from somewhere at the rear, made him ignore the crouching figure. Jerking open the door of the big store-room, Sam swiftly invaded its gloomy depths.

Angela's voice was clearer, excitedly calling his name, which she doubtless had heard uttered in the trading room. In a log cubby-hole, opening off the store-room, he found her. It was a time for running, not holding a lover's reunion, and Sam hustled Angela to the trade room.

"Big doings, folks!" Wash met them with. Rafferty's gun just popped."

They sped from the trading post, Sam keeping hold of the girl's hand until he had lifted her onto the horse that was to have carried Job Catlin southward. Rafferty indicated the fallen trapper he had targeted as they pounded for the gateway. Presumably, the fellow had heard the commotion inside the post and come alone to learn its cause.

It was hoped that none of the other fire fighters had got wind of the set-to. But as Harney's party emerged from the stockage, buckskinned figures were loping around the far corner. Braxton and Rafferty, who had reloaded, again emptied their rifles, and two of the running men stumbled.

Sam had snatched the buffalo horn powder flask and bullet-pouch from a trapper slain in the trade room scrimmage, and he loaded up with his horse at a gallop. They were clear of the post, and the open prairie stretched before them into the south; but pursuit was inevitable. Half the trappers quit fire-fighting to straddle ponies, and the night resounded to the increasing thunder of hoofbeats.

With a head-start, Sam and his friends held a good interval between them and the trailing trappers. Only an occasional shot was swapped at long range, and every starlit mile traversed brought the fugitives nearer Colonel Northrop's post.

Dawn was at hand and the hope of outriding their tenacious pursuers flamed high when, out of a ravine head westward, lashed ten or a dozen red pony riders. Others galloped after them, all yelling shrilly. More and more, until the plain swarmed with scudding warriors.

"It's the war party laying for the troopers!" shouted Sam Harney. "Soldiers ain't gone by yet. Ride hard! We can't let them devils cut us off!"

The scouts and the girl—she kept her seat like one born to the saddle, knowing her life depended on it—whipped the last ounce of speed out of their mounts, veering over to the east. If caught between the band of trappers and the Indians, they'd never see the sunrise.

Rifles spurted at warriors who led the rest. Bullet and arrow sped in return. The mad drumming of hooves topped the demonlike screeching. The scouts' party was drawing ahead, and the wild-eyed war ponies abruptly changed their course from due east to south.

Daylight's first beam pierced the shadowy plain as Sam and his friends crossed a low ridge. Their mounts couldn't hold much longer to this killing pace. Then a wild burst of cheering rasped powder-dry throats. Troopers, rank after rank of them, four abreast, were heading across the plain. Guidons fluttered in the early morning breeze, unholstered carbines glinted a threat of death-dealing to come.

"It's the colonel!" yelled Sam.

AND Colonel Northrop it was, with all but a handful of his yellow legs from the nearly completed fort. Beside him, at the head of the hurrying column, rode one of Catlin's treacherous messengers, a man named Moggins.

Sam's rifle was loaded as he galloped toward the cavalrymen. He saw the trapper suddenly dart at a tangent through the dust film, hunched low in the saddle. Moggins realized that his only safety lay in joining the red men streaming over the ridge, but he didn't make it. Sam's gun crashed and a riderless pony pounded to freedom.

Angela Loftus reined her mount to a trembling stand as buckskin men and troopers met. She held that position, bent over in the saddle with fatigue, while Sam and his pards wheeled to join the charge that brassy bugle notes had launched.

The war party, its plan of ambuscade defeated, milled on the slope. The renegade trappers had caught up, and a scattering volley of riflefire opened the ball. The cavalry charge rolled on, in spite of crumpling blue-clad figures. Carbines spat in a long line of withering flame, and the Indians broke back across the ridge. The troopers thundered at their heels, sweeping them with blast after blast of lethal lead.

The scouts tallied at every trigger-squeeze, and the flight became a rout as sabers flashed. Then the Recall was sounded, and the sweating troopers tugged rein in the settling dust.

"It's bad tidings they'll be carrying to Catlin and the varmints at the gulch," Dade Rafferty observed, watching the scurrying Indians and trappers fade away in the north.

"Meaning you'll leave the whole outfit to go fight, Colonel?" Harney asked Northrop who, with campaign hat removed, was mopping face and neck. "You better wait for troops from the road camp before moving on. Likely Catlin's other courier done his errand and they've hit the trail."

Northrop nodded. "We'll wait. Meantime I'd like to know what it's all about, especially why Miss Loftus is up here. Surprised me, too, when you shot that Moggins, who was guiding us to the gulch. I couldn't let those workmen be massacred, even though they ran out on us."

Sam's recital of events didn't take long, but it was nearly noon before the troops from the road camp appeared. Dacer, the false guide, knew something was wrong when he beheld Northrop's column dismounted and at ease in the sun. They should have been annihilated about sunrise or earlier. Dacer tried to ride clear, as Moggins had done, but a suspicious lieutenant cut him from the saddle.

Hopeful that the besieged workmen hadn't been overwhelmed, with Harney and his scouts out in front, Colonel Northrop's regiment headed northwest. At the extreme rear of the column rode Angela Loftus, accompanied by a whiskered sergeant, whose duty it was to keep her out of danger since she must go along.

When the soldiers got within sound of the gulch, rifles were still crashing. Evidently the workmen were holding out against terrific odds. Northrop divided his force, to strike the Indians' front and flank, and Harney rode with the commander upslope to the smoke-hazed gulch.

A tide of red warriors rolled down upon them, defying the volleying carbines. Horseback and afoot, soldier and Indian crashed together, shooting, slashing in battle frenzy. Sam and his scouts wasted no powder; their tomahawks split countless heads.

But Northrop's men held ground, allowing their comrades in army blue time to move into position for flank attack. Laborers pelted from the gulch as the flankers charged, firing their last shots into the wavering red horde. Big Cloud, Bent Arm and Conquering Bear were dead. The surviving chiefs had not the same quality of leadership, to keep the warriors fighting, with bullets mowing them down in a crossfire.

And Job Catlin—

Catlin was riding from the field on his powerful bay. The fight was lost, his trappers had been cut down to a

man. He was hitting trail for Fort Lancehead, there to make a stand if pursued. Sam Harney, hunkered down by a boulder and busting caps at scattering red riders, saw the buckskin figure on the big bay flash by.

SAM had the bridle reins of his mount looped over left arm, for the large roundhead sheltered both man and horse. The scout sprang to the flat-horned saddle and followed Catlin through fog of dust and powdersmoke. Colonel Northrop wouldn't want Job as a prisoner now, and Sam was thinking of that burned post at Buckhorn Knob, of the mountain men who had lost their hair because he had trusted Job Catlin.

Down the rock-ribbed trail eastward of the valley fled Catlin; with not a glance to the rear, unconscious of pursuit until, as the battle sounds were left behind, he caught the fast drumming of Harney's gun-prodded horse. The trader hipped in the saddle, rifle lifted.

"It's you or me, Catlin!" Sam shouted, letting the reins fall and swinging up his rifle. "This is for the Knob massacre!"

The long rifles boomed as one, and Sam reeled with lead-shock. Righting himself, he saw Catlin on the ground, but stirring. Iron Hand staggered up, plucking tomahawk from beaded belt.

"You never saw the day you could whip me, Harney!" he bellowed. "I'll pack your hair back to Angela Loftus!"

Sam, riding him down, dropped suddenly from the saddle, casting aside his Hawkins to clutch his tomahawk. They faced each other in deadly throwing range.

"Even if she was where you left her, Catlin, your medicine ain't strong enough to let you take my scalp!"

Half-crouched Sam stood, tensely balanced on moccasined feet. His gray eyes smoked, his lips were thinned to a grim slash.

"If she was—you got her away from my men?"

The big trader read the answer in Sam's mocking gaze. Suddenly he pitched the tomahawk. But Sam Harney's whizzing blade halved the bearded features as Catlin's weapon spun from his hand.

Sam walked to his dead enemy and drew the Green River knife from Catlin's belt. Job had taken his, a week ago. He pushed aside the wool hat, grasped the thick hair on top, then shook his head and sheathed the knife.

"No," the scout grunted "tomahawking's enough."

The battle was over when he rode back to the victorious troopers at the gulch, packing Catlin on the recaptured bay. Though the Indians would no doubt make small raids on road and fort builders in the future, no great and united opposition should hinder the expedition, for the chief plotter against it was dead.

The smoke of soldiers' and laborers' campfires spiraled toward the evening sky. Colonel Northrop, standing by one of these fires, with arms folded, spoke to his chief scout across the comfortable blaze.

"What'll you do when you're through scouting—start another trading post?" he asked.

Sam Harney, seated on one side of Angela Loftus, with old Wash Braxton on the other, glanced at the girl, then at his partner of the fur trade and war trail.

"No, Colonel," Sam replied. "I reckon the beaver trade is going downhill. When the new road opens, there'll be need of a big supply store, to sell to the freight and emigrant caravans heading through. Wash and Dade Rafferty will be my business pardners, and I've got hopes that Angela—"

He paused, looking at her squarely with earnest eyes.

"You haven't asked me, Sam." She smiled. "But I will be—your life partner."

Goldy the Gunhawk

By W. F. BRAGG

The kid was right young for a law-dog until the Rangers loaned him the tools for the job!

BIG FRANK BARBER was sitting with his cronies of Sundown in the shade of the tall cottonwood tree near Chicago Jake Lowden's adobe store when the boy rode up on a scrawny gray pony. The yellow prairie drowsed in the midsummer heat.

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Long since, the last Texas trail herd had crossed northward over the Red River. Few riders passed through town. Time dragged. It was anything for a laugh.

As the boy trailed his pot metal spurs through the dust, the lounging men eyed him lazily from head to foot, his linsey-woolsey jeans tucked into cowhide boots, the huge gun swinging from a belt around his ragged middle, patched huck shirt, long yellow hair showing under the brim of a sweat-stained slouch hat.

"I've heard," the boy said gravely, fixing a pair of solemn gray eyes upon Big Frank, "that you're marshal of this town. I'd like to hire out to you."

Big Frank lowered the turkey wing fan with which he was cooling his mottled red face. He drooped one eyelid at his friends, Bart Tuggs, and Jim Brown who ran the town's public feed yard.

"I'm afraid," he drawled gently, "that you're right young for a lawdog. You ain't quite filled out your britches yet."

Slab-sided Tuggs grinned, and spat into the dust.

"That gun you pack," he said, "has about pulled 'em down around your boots."

"You better go get some experience," Jim Brown mumbled, lifting an end of his longhorn mustache to gnaw off a fresh chew of tobacco.

The boy stood his ground. The gray pony, trailing rawhide reins, stepped over to Chicago Jake's watering trough and gratefully sank its dusty nose in life-giving coolness.

"That's what the Rangers told me," the kid said, "when I went to 'em with a plan for catching up with Comanche. They told me to go out and get some experience. But they loaned me some tools to get it with." And he slapped the red wooden stock of his sagging gun.

Big Frank straightened his fleshy form. A glint came into his eyes.

"I was a Ranger myself," he said slowly, "till I began packing too much flesh for the saddle. Why did they send you to me?" The boy said, "They didn't send me. I just come. Missed out on a couple of good trail jobs, too. Rode Spot to a whisper getting here. Figured this was the place to trap Comanche."

"THIS here Comanche outlaw is a murdering devil," said Big Frank. "You knew he got his name because he's counted more cruel than any war-whoop that ever rode the Staked Plains? Not satisfied with killing and robbing folks along Red River, he ear-marks 'em to show he turned the trick. The Ranger force has put a thousand-dollar reward on his head."

"I reckon," drawled Tuggs to the boy, with a sardonic slant of his green eyes, "that you're some busted trail rat that aims to collect that blood money by bushwhacking this Comanche a whole lot."

"Shucks!" laughed Jim Brown. "If Comanche ever hears about that, you'll collect easy. He'll die laughing."

The boy flushed under the mask of dust that covered his gaunt and sun-baked features.

Shrugging skinny shoulders, he swung toward his pony.

"Wait a minute, kid," Big Frank called. And to Tuggs and Brown he added, "You two shut up. You've had your laugh."

When the boy came back, Big Frank smiled at him.

"Just what's your plan for capturing Comanche?" he asked softly. "And don't tell me it's some locoed way a kid would figure to collect that reward."

The boy's slender frame quivered like that of a quarter horse at the start of the race. He leaned forward, hands clenched, and his gray eyes looked big and round as poker chips in his solemn face.

"Listen," he half whispered, and gestured toward Chicago Jake's place. "Everybody in Texas who runs a trail

joint like Jake's won't take bank checks or greenback money for what they sell. Half the cowpunchers, going north this year, have spent hard money with Jake before they crossed the Red. He never took it to a bank. It's hid out somewheres around this place. But the season's over, and one of these days Jake'll take that money south for banking, under guard. He's made plenty. He's the richest bait along the Red. I figured Comanche would hit him up some bright day, and I wanted to be around when he tried it."

"So you know about Jake's bank roll?" Big Frank asked. "Strange you'd be so interested. None of your business, after all, kid."

"The Rangers told me to get experience by using what brains I had," the boy said. "I started speculating on a likely place for Comanche to stick up during the slack season. Jake's place filled the bill. So I come here."

"It's one of Comanche's tricks," Big Frank pointed out, "to slip a spy into the town or camp where he plans a raid. To find out who's got the roll or where the dinero's hid out. There was that case of Pop Ridley, the horseman, early this spring. And then last year, up in the Indian Nations—"

But the boy cut him short. He stalked toward his pony, saying over his shoulder:

"If you take me for a spy, I might just as well drift out of town."

For a fleshy man, Big Frank moved swiftly. He jerked a short gun from under his vest.

"Kid," he snapped, you don't leave till you tell us more about this plan of yours." To Tuggs he gave a harsh order. "Take away his gun."

Eyes blazing, the boy faced Marshal Frank Barber while Tuggs removed the belt and holstered Colt.

"Goldy, the gunhawk," Tuggs said mockingly, rippling his fingers through the boy's long hair. "Maybe you ought to get a haircut. Comanche might mistake you for a doll baby."

Straight as the strike of a snake, the boy's fist smashed into Tuggs's grinning mouth.

Cursing, blood streaming from cut lips, Tuggs reeled toward the cottonwood.

Then, regaining balance, he rushed the boy.

Tuggs outweighed his opponent by fifty pounds. He was upon the boy before the marshal or Jim Brown could interfere.

"Let him alone!" Big Frank bawled. "He hasn't got a gun!"

NEVER an inch did the boy give. He met Tugg's charge, braced on his cowhide boots, blowing defiantly on a bruised set of knuckles.

"I'll jerk every gold hair out of your head!" Tuggs snarled.

He reached for the boy's topknot, but his heavy hand, falling low as the boy dodged, fastened on the youngster's collar. With one savage jerk, Tuggs ripped off half the boy's shirt. Sharp shoulder-blades, the reedy ribs of half-starved youth were disclosed. And low down on the left side, the small blue scar of a freshly healed wound.

Bent under Tuggs's fierce attack, arms thrown up to ward off flailing fists, the boy sank to his knees in the gray dust. As he knelt, gasping for air, Tuggs stepped back, then raised a boot for a kick intended to cave in the boy's ribs.

Out of Jake's adobe bustled a stocky man with a fringe of musty gray hair around his bald head. A dirty flour-sack apron half hid baggy pants. Red undershirt sleeves were rolled high on fat hairy arms. Bare feet were thrust into pink carpet slippers. One slipper flew high as the old man jumped between Tuggs and his victim.

"Loafer!" he sputtered. "I don't pay you to drive away trade!"

"Trade!" roared Tuggs. "He ain't trade! He's a spy for Comanche. He's here to find out where you hide your

money! Wanted to hire out as a guard! We took away his gun!"

Brushing the dust off his tattered garments, the boy arose. He tried to fasten up his shirt but Tuggs had ripped off all the buttons. He shook his head gloomily.

"I ain't a spy," he told Jake. "But I'm getting what the rangers said I needed. Plenty experience. If they'll give me back my gun, I'll go on my way."

"You'll get no gun," said Big Frank, "till you tell me who you are, and all you know about Comanche."

"All I know about Comanche is this. He's a murdering wolf and I'll never quit till I catch up with him! I could use that gun when I do. But if I can't have it, I'll try something else." To Chicago Jake he said gravely, "I'm thanking you for the help you gave me."

Jake cocked an eye, and rubbed his bald head slowly. When Tuggs began cursing the boy, Jake angrily told him to go soak his hot head in the watering trough.

"So you want to hire out for guard to me?" Jake asked the boy.

"I was told Big Frank's marshal. But his main job seems to be guarding you. Folks say you own about everything in Sundown. So I tackled him for the job 'stead of you."

Jake punched the boy's thin stomach.

"How long since you last ate?" he asked.

"Not long back," he answered. "But not much then."

"Well," said Jake, "I am finding I need more guards. I got big business around here. Trail herds gone past but men ride up and down the trail. In my place there"— Jake jerked a thumb toward the adobe— "I sell little bit of everything from rum to gunpowder. I am also run little lunch counter where I cook up chile con carne and beans and coffee for hungry people. I am also feed these three lazy loafers every day, this Big Frank, Tuggs, and Jim Brown. They eat regular as horses in spite of the heat. So I am bent over hot stove all day long. Then I am wash dirty pots and pans all day long."

He turned and sniffed the air, frowned.

"I am finding myself so busy cooking, like now when my sourdough biscuits are burning, that I got no time for regular business." He started for the doorway on the trot, his blob of a red nose still twitching anxiously. "I am hire you for guard. But when you are not guarding, you will cook, wash pots and pans, wait on table, tend store, wash out place in morning, sweep. And when you are through, then you can guard!"

The boy seized his bridle reins.

"You've hired a hand," he answered briskly. "Where do I put my cayuse?"

"In the stable behind," Jake shouted, vanishing into the adobe. "Two stalls there. Take the one nearest the door. Other is always reserved for customers."

THE boy said to the gray, "Come on, Spot." He started around the end of the adobe. As he walked past Big Frank, he said, "I'm hired as a guard. Reckon yuh'll turn over my gun now."

Frank shook his head, while Tuggs stood glowering.

"No gun for you, kid, while you hang around Sundown. Go on and wash them dishes."

"And get a hair-cut," Tuggs added sneeringly.

The boy uncinched Spot, and led him into the stall near the door indicated by Jake. The manger was filled with dry wild hay. The boy smiled as Spot began an eager munching.

"I can take on some of that chile myself," he said. His smile faded. "But it's sure a come down for a rider to wash dishes," he muttered. "Waddies don't do that till they got nothing else in sight."

Sighing, he untied a seamless war-

sack from the back of his saddle. It clanked as he laid it on the floor.

A shadow cut off the sunshine from the doorway and he looked up into Chicago Jake's round red face, small eyes, hard and shiny as coffee beans.

"What you got there?" asked Jake.

"Just some things the Rangers give me. Tools."

"You work for me now. You show me what them Rangers give you."

Reluctantly the boy opened the sack. From it he took a long bowie knife, with an eight-inch blade, and a set of rusty handcuffs.

"The Rangers told me to ear-mark Comanche," he explained, "after I got the cuffs on him."

Jake's eyes flashed and he sputtered as he rubbed the top of his round head.

"Such goings on," he snapped. "For a little boy like you. Dis Comanche, he eat you alive at one big bite. But you ride around with such things." Indignantly, Jake kicked the cuffs, stubbed his toe and cursed. "Throw them on the trash pile," he commanded. "I buy old iron, but these things—they are not even worth polishing up for trade."

The boy stood up and his gray eyes flashed.

"I ain't no little tad," he said, "and Comanche won't eat me either. Nor will I throw these things away. The Rangers loaned 'em to me. I told you, out there, I was set to get Comanche."

Old Jake shook his head, smiled, and put an arm around the boy's still shoulder.

"Don't get so mad like little rooster," he said. "Wot you think those three big loafers sit outside my place for? Hey? I hire them as guards until I can bank my money. With three big men like them, big eaters too, like work horse, I am not afraid of Comanche. But you come along and I think, maybe, I do no more cooking or washing dishes in this heat. I don't want good dishwasher killed off by Comanche."

The boy smiled. "I'll wash your dishes," he said. "I'll put this stuff away where it won't bother you."

"Good," Jake approved. "After all, catching Comanche is job for big men like Frank. Not for boys. This Comanche is terrible fellow. You hear about what he did to old Pop Ridley this spring? He kill the poor old man. He steal his horses. Ear-mark Pop so we'll all know it is Comanche's work."

"I heard about that," the boy muttered.

"There is one fellow with Pop when this happen. He got away. Everybody think he is spy for Comanche."

"I heard that, too."

"So now you know why I hire big men for guard, boy for wash dishes and cook. Stable your pony. Always keep him in same stall. Other is for customers' horses."

The boy glanced into the vacant stall.

"Not used often," he said. "I'll throw a fresh forkful of hay in the manger."

He reached for the pitchfork in a dark corner. But Jake objected.

"I keep grain box locked up. High-priced. I look after all customers' horses. None of your worry. Now—let us go in and eat supper. Then you wash dishes. After that, if you not too sleepy, you guard."

Jake's nose twitched. He broke into a trot.

"Hurry!" he shouted. "Biscuits are burning again!"

JAKE'S place resembled a hundred other trading posts along the Texas Trail. Counters lined the side walls. Shelves were stocked with merchandise appealing to cattlemen and their riders.

In the rear, behind a greasy plank counter, the boy labored over the hot stove and sink filled with dirty dishes. Sweat poured from him as he plunged his arms into steaming soapy water or stirred up bubbling red-hot chile. Jake, freed from this duty, ambled

happily back and forth, serving occasional customers to a pair of boots, a second-hand six-shooter, or a horn of red-eye, as their tastes ran.

Singly, the three guards came for their meals. And when a stranger entered the place, one of the guards also strolled in to examine the new arrival.

"That way," Jake explained to the boy, "Comanche can never take me by surprise. Always two men outside if I need help."

Big Frank and Jim Brown seldom had words with the boy as he served them with tough fried beef or bowls of peppery soup. But Tuggs could not forget his clash with the lad. One day, as the boy leaned over the counter, filling Tugg's coffee cup, the slab-sided guard seized a handful of long yellow hair.

"Goldilocks," he sneered. "I got a notion to give you a hair-cut!"

Tilting the pot, the boy dumped hot java on Tuggs's hand. With a yell, the man leaped off his stool. But as he reached for a gun, old Jake yelled from the front of the store. From behind a sawed-off shotgun which he had picked up.

"Tuggs! That'll learn you to let the help alone! Get out a here!"

The lanky guard went, but muttering that there was something fishy about a boy who wore his hair long in hot weather.

Jake questioned his dishwasher.

"Why you not let me cut your hair?" he asked. "I got good pair horse clippers! That way, you keep out of customer's soup."

The boy grinned. "I've sworn not to cut my hair till I catch up with Comanche," he said.

"You will need hair ribbons," said Jake, "before that happen.— What about that trap for Comanche? You got it set?"

"Listen!" the boy flared. "You've all laughed enough about that trap. Let's forget it."

The time came when Jake announced that on the next day he would hire horses from Jim Brown and depart southward, on his regular mid-summer business trip.

"I buy stock," he told the boy. "Get ready for next trail season. You can run place while I'm away." He winked. "If Comanche show up, no need to worry. No money left around here."

The boy nodded. Jake would carry his bank roll with him for deposit in a bank. It would be out of Comanche's greedy reach.

"Why do you hire horses from Brown?" he asked. "You got a big stable, but you never keep a horse there for yourself."

Jake laughed. "I am silent partner with Jim. I really own his horses."

"Why not keep a private mount out there with Spot? There's a vacant stall."

"I tell you I keep dot stall for customers. Good business."

But the boy, turning again to greasy pots and pans, shook his head. Never a horse had occupied the stable excepting his pony.

Toward mid-afternoon when he was scraping black soot off a big bake pan, two riders jingled their spurs into the place. Jake bustled forward, grinning, to wait on trade. One of the men, lean as a wolf, red-bearded, called for a couple jolts of red-eye.

Tuggs strolled into the place to inspect the strange customers. Apparently satisfied, he turned around to depart.

"Have a drink," the red-bearded man invited genially.

"Got a couple friends outside," said Tuggs.

"Bring 'em in. Little talk will help settle the likker."

STANDING back of the counter, Jake was filling the glasses, smiling broadly as gold money rang on the boards. These customers looked so peaceful in their dusty trail garb, never a gun in sight. In trooped Tuggs, followed by Big Frank and Jim Brown.

"Fill 'em up again!" called the red-bearded rider. Then, as Jake tilted a jug, he stepped away from the counter, whipped a gun from under his coat, and threw down on the bald-headed trader. "Put' em up!" he ordered. "And fast!"

Big Frank cursed, and pivoted, spearing for his gun. Tuggs, standing at his arm, whirled, and crashed a gun-barrel down on Big Frank's head. The Sundown marshal slumped to the floor. He sought to arise, still struggling to free his gun. Chopping down, Tuggs shot Frank through his fat right arm.

"Stay quiet," he warned, "or the next goes through your head!"

Jim Brown stood with arms over his head, guarded by the companion of the red-bearded man who had ordered drinks.

"So you were the real spy, hey?" Old Jake snarled to Tuggs, eyes popping but hands held high. "Loafer! And I feed you good all summer. But never"—Jake spat— "will I show you where I hide my money."

"What's this talk about spies?" the red-bearded man said to Tuggs.

Tuggs nodded toward the boy behind the lunch counter.

"Goldy, there, wanted to set a trap for you. But these fools all thought he was a spy. Before we get out of here, Comanche, I aim to cut that kid's hair off!"

Comanche stalked to the counter.

"Turn around here!" he said to the boy.

The boy obeyed. His face was smeared with soot off the bottom of the pan he had been cleaning.

"You're sure a fine-looking spy," Comanche said contemptuously. "When I get through in here, I'll earmark you all to show how I rounded up this place."

His gun and voice menaced trembling old Jake, but the trader refused to show his hidden bank roll. Finally Tuggs and the other bandit seized the old man and stretched him on his counter. They pulled off his slippers. He lay there, wriggling his bare toes.

"Stick your poker in the fire!" Comanche shouted to the boy. "Get it red-hot! He'll talk when we tickle his feet with it!"

"No!" Jake yelled hoarsely. "I no talk! Burn my feet off! I still not talk!"

Lying on the floor, Big Frank pleaded weakly, "Comanche, act like a white man!"

Tuggs turned and kicked his former chief.

"Shut your big mouth," he snarled. "A fool like you, who gets took in so easy, got no right to talk."

Comanche advanced on Jake with poker end red and smoking. He laughed as he flashed it past the old man's curling toes.

"You ready to talk?" he asked.

"No!" gasped Jake. "No!"

"Put up the poker, Comanche!" the boy called out from the end of the room. "I know where he hid his dinero."

"You?"

"Me. I'll show you where it's hid. If—if you'll split with me." The boy's blackened face expanded in a sly grin. "That's why I come here. To find that dinero. But I guess you've beat me to it."

Comanche turned on Tuggs with a hearty laugh.

"That's good," he said. "The kid tricked even you."

"Better I lose all than find out dis boy is crook," Old Chicago Jake groaned out.

"Where's the money?" asked Comanche.

"Out in the stable. Buried under the floor of a vacant stall."

"Spy!" Jake shouted bitterly. "After I am your friend, you rob me!"

Tuggs pushed the old man down on the counter.

"Watch 'em," Comanche said to his henchmen. "I'll go to the stable with the kid."

"You watch *him*," Tuggs warned. "He's a tricky one. I'd never split

that dinero with him."

"Me afraid of a yaller-haired kid?" Comanche laughed, trailing the boy through the rear door. "As for splitting all I'll split is his ear."

HE KNELT and watched eagerly as the boy dug a hole in the floor of the vacant stall.

Casting aside a last spadeful of earth, the boy drew a square box from the hole. As he placed it carefully on the floor, it clanked.

"Jake's money," the boy whispered, opening the lid. "Look!"

Comanche's beard jutted as he thrust his head forward. Metal flashed in the dim light from the doorway. Comanche yelled at the sudden sharp tug on his whiskers, followed an instant later by the searing pain of razor-sharp steel. But his shout was choked off as a cold blade scratched his taut throat.

"Listen," the boy whispered, "I'll cut your throat like butchering a hog if you make one move! I'm holding a bowie knife right agin your Adam's apple. Put your hands in back of you!"

When Comanche next stalked through the back door of the trading post, every eye turned on him. Soot covered his shirt front. Blood dripped slowly from his right ear. His heavy face wore a stupefied expression. His hands were behind his back.

"Where's Goldy?" cried Tuggs, instantly suspicious.

The boy spoke for himself, stepping briskly from behind Comanche's frame.

"Here," he said, and pitched up a long gun.

"Tricked!" groaned Tuggs. But he was dying as he spoke for his gun cracked a split second late when Goldy's gun roared.

The remaining outlaw leaped toward the door. Jim Brown threw him as he would throw a calf in roundup season, and bestrode him. Old Jake slid off the counter.

"Little rooster," Jake said softly, "all the time you know where I hide my money. Somehow you get a gun after you coax Comanche out there."

But Goldy shook his head.

"I never knew where you hid your money. But I buried a box there, some time ago, with bowie knife and cuffs in it, because the stall wasn't used. He walked right into the trap.

"Then I got his gun and we come in here, him in front so's Tuggs wouldn't see me first."

Big Frank leaned heavily against a counter, holding his right arm. "I'll write my Ranger friends," he said, "that you got plenty experience now to work for 'em."

"Thanks," said Goldy. "But before I try for a job, I'll get a hair-cut."

He flipped back his long yellow locks. They saw that he lacked the top of his right ear.

"Had to hide that mark," he went on. "That's why I wore my hair so long. I was the feller with Pop Ridley when Comanche robbed and killed him. I—I was more than just a feller, though. I was Ridley's son." His voice broke, then steadied. "Comanche shot me, and left me for dead. But somehow I got over it. Swore I wouldn't quit till he was paid back for Dad. Tuggs wasn't along the day Dad was killed. But if he'd seen my ear, he'd have busted up my plans. I was scared when Comanche came in, fearing he'd recognize me spite of the long hair. So I smeared soot on my face.

"Out there in the barn, I told Comanche who I was and why I would like to cut his throat. Even used his shirt for a towel. Seemed to take most of the sap out of him. I think he'll go meekly along to jail now."

Old Jake laughed. "We help you take care of Comanche now. If Rangers got no job open, you come back here. You be same as my son. Lots of gunhawks on Red River. But hard to find a good cook and dishwasher with experience."

It was sheer heresy in cow country, yet little Bowie wanted to be a railroader!

"I'm acting for the agent," said Bowie

You Can't Tell From SIZE

By J. R. JACKSON

HANK REAGAN, the stringy, fast deputy sheriff, was passing judgment on the three-day rain just ended. Rain had splattered down and run off in little gullies and rivulets across the semiarid flat in which the little cowtown of Waylin was situated.

"Believe it's the most rain this

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country ever seen," he declared.

Old Tad Bacon, the railroad agent, nodded judiciously.

"Yep, Hank, you're right. Most water I've seen in my fifty years in Waylin."

"Exactly my opinion, fellers. Heaviest rain we ever had."

The two stared at little Bowie Ridgin. There was mingled amusement and contempt in their eyes. The shabby little fellow, trying to look grown-up and wise, just couldn't get away with it.

"That settles it." Hank grinned. "If Bowie says it's the biggest, there can't be no comeback."

"Yep, that sure settles it," mocked the old agent.

Bowie Ridgin had no standing at all in the community. He was a right tiny fellow, although nicely formed, but you mightn't notice it on account of his clothes being worn and ragged from his not having any steady employment. People couldn't help liking him, but he didn't stack up to the solid citizens.

Waylin was a cowtown, pure and simple. There was other business, sure—the drinking emporium, the general store and such—but cattle was the industry. A young fellow who didn't punch cows as the best bet to make his pile was considered a mite loco, and that was Bowie's trouble.

Bowie wanted to be a railroader. While the other young fellows rode and fought and swam and hired out to neighboring spreads to learn the cow business, Bowie just hung around the dingy little railroad depot. He followed Tad Bacon around like a hound dog, trying to get the know-how of railroading.

The little fellow would have done about all the work around the place if Tad had let him, and have done it pretty well, too, because no one ever said Bowie didn't have brains in that head of his. He knew the Morse code, could punch a ticket as well as Tad could, and made up in trying what he lacked in strength in wrestling mail, freight, luggage and such.

The 2:15 was about due, and there was old Bowie lugging the two mail sacks out to the platform. Hank Reagan had ridden away as old Tad went in to take a message off the wire. Bowie grabbed up a piece of brown wrapping paper and went in to copy the message, too, just for the practice.

BOTH Bowie and the old agent looked more and more worried as they copied down what the wire said. These were line orders coming from Meigs Junction about fifty miles away, and they were dumping trouble right into the lap of old Tad Bacon.

"Red Duncan has taken bad sick on his run," muttered Tad, a worried frown on his old face.

"And the supe says to get a replacement," added Bowie, looking keenly at the old man and trying to figure how Tad was going to meet this crisis.

"If that don't skin a cat!" exclaimed Tad. "Where in thunder am I going to find a substitute engineer around here?"

Bowie scratched his head. He knew an ambitious man could use a situation like this to help his career, but just now he couldn't quite see how he fitted into the picture.

"You got to move the Two-fifteen," he said. "The Cherokee Express comes in at four and there can't nothing get in the way of her."

Tad grunted irritably. "Don't tell me my business, Bowie. You think I don't know the Cherokee Express has to go through?"

Bowie got a shrewd look on his face. "I've rode the cab to Meigs Junction and back more times than you could shake a stick at."

"You telling me *you* can take Red Duncan's place?" yelled Tad, so mad and bothered now he was red in the face.

"I ain't said that," replied Bowie, without getting at all sore. "Cy Stoddard has fired the Two-fifteen a long

time. He'll take Red's place and I'll fire for him."

Tad looked at the ragged little fellow, sort of half-mad and half-amused at him because of his spunk. Then the old agent looked as if he was going to burst out laughing.

"There won't be any more like you, Bowie," he declared. "They done tore up the mold. You got railroading in your blood like a cow gets hoof and mouth."

Bowie took it as a compliment and grinned friendly-like.

"Thanks, Tad. I'll fire that old Two-fifteen through, never worry."

Old Tad shook his head, kind of sadly.

"No, Bowie, I ain't going to let you go."

"But you got to, Tad! There's nobody else."

"Yep, there is. I'm going."

Bowie stared at the old man as if he couldn't believe what he heard. Slowly it dawned on him what his old hero was doing, and a big grin came over his face.

"That means—"

The old agent nodded. "Yep. You're going to be the agent till I come back."

Bowie felt like yelling. "Don't worry, Tad," he said. "I'll give 'em the best job of agenting they ever had."

Old Tad looked worried all the same.

"Now don't mess into things, Bowie. You'll get clearance on the Cherokee an hour before she's due. Just set the all clear signals like you done a hundred times."

"Don't worry about anything," replied Bowie manfully, as if he were talking to an equal.

Bowie had fetched Doc Meekle and his buckboard by the time the 2:15 got in, ten minutes late, and blowing like an old hound dog. Tad, Bowie and Cy Stoddard got Red Duncan out of the cab and over to the carriage, all doubled over with a misery in his stomach, and white in the face.

The Doc looked worried and drove quickly away without saying much. Cy Stoddard looked at Tad, waiting to hear the orders for the 2:15.

"I'm firing for you, Cy," old Tad said. "You'll have to take her in to Meigs Junction."

Cy nodded. "All right, Tad. Can you leave your station?"

Tad looked kind of worried. "Bowie'll be agent while I'm gone."

Cy, a husky blond giant, looked at Bowie and gave him a big wink.

"Don't stop the Cherokee, sprout. Old man Darling shoots men for stopping his train. She ain't never been late."

Tad and Cy laughed, but Bowie spunked right back.

"I ain't stopping her without reason. If there's reason to, she'll stop. Don't fret about that."

CY AND the old man climbed into the engine cab, and Bowie threw the mailbags aboard the mail car. The tall-stacked engine began to move with great bellows and grunts. Bowie watched her until she got around the curve. As she disappeared he could see old Tad heaving coal.

Back in the depot it was quiet and lonesome, and Bowie wished that Tad had given him some kind of a job to keep him busy. The papers and equipment were all neat and tidy, so Bowie decided to sweep out the place. About fifteen minutes to three o'clock, he went to the wire and asked for orders on the Cherokee.

The operator at Meigs Junction was asleep and got plenty riled about Bowie waking him up. He sent back that the orders weren't ready and to keep off the wire. Bowie sent back for him not to get in a turmoil, signed off, and the wire was dead until three o'clock.

Promptly at three, Bowie came back at the Meigs Junction operator with a demand for the orders. He could tell by the way Meigs Junction answered he was still riled about being waked up.

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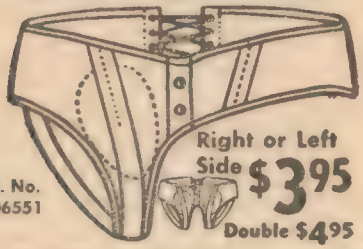

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Bowie was told to stand by for a second. He sharpened his pencil, took down a pink telegraph form and got all set to copy to message in his clear, round hand. Bowie was proud enough to explode. This would be the first sure enough message he had ever taken alone.

The wire began to snap and clack real fast as though Meigs Junction wanted him to miss it, but Bowie had his tongue between his teeth and got every letter. He had about three words on the pink form when, with a loud *clack*, the wire went dead.

Bowie pounded the key a second, then realized it was a mechanical breakdown somewhere. A light sweat broke out around his forehead.

He wasn't going to let anything like this happen on his first day as a real station agent.

He checked over his batteries and equipment. They all tested perfect. The trouble must be along the wire somewhere or with the instrument at Meigs Junction. He traced the wire out of the station and gazed along the single telegraph line that followed the tracks. No break as far as he could see.

Bowie had read the station agent's manual enough to know what his duty was in such an emergency. In case of wire breakdown, the agent must take the responsibility for clearing or stopping train service on his stretch of track. Little Bowie felt a shiver run through him.

If it had been a local cattle train, like the 2:15, he wouldn't have minded so much. But it wasn't a local train. It was the transcontinental Cherokee Express with the proudest record of any train in service. To have interfered with the hand of Fate would have seemed just as serious to Bowie as to hold Cherokee.

Bowie spotted Hank Regan over near Slagel's general store and gave him a yell. The quick-moving deputy walked over to see what the rumpus was.

"Lawsy me, Bowie," he declared, when he heard, "I don't know what to

tell you. There's been heavy rains in the Panamints lately, like we got here. Railroad's had trouble with washouts there before."

Bowie rubbed his damp forehead with his red kerchief.

"That might have washed a pole over and killed the wire. How much rain you reckon the Panamints got, Hank?"

The deputy screwed up his forehead to answer that one.

"I was trailing a thieving Injun in the hills, and had to give up," he said. "All sign washed away. Judge they got about three days' rain, like with us."

Bowie whistled. He well knew that much rain could play hob with railroad track in a semiarid country. The Cherokee would be the first fast train through the Panamints since the rain stopped. Little Bowie could smell danger for the Cherokee in those hills, and the failure of the wire seemed to clinch the case.

"I'm going to stop the Cherokee Express," he said.

Hank Reagan got dead serious. "I got no right to interfere, Bowie, but you better know what you're doing."

BOWIE'S face showed he knew what a serious step he was taking. Not only the railroad, but the whole country was proud of the Cherokee's record. The President of the United States himself had said the train was an ornament to the country.

"This might cook my goose with the railroad, Hank," Bowie said thoughtfully, "but no Cherokee Express is going to run into a washout while I'm agent on this line."

Hank shook his head, offered no comment. The look on his face seemed to say that Tad Bacon had been all kinds of fool to let an inexperienced little runt take over, but he didn't put it in words.

Bowie ran out to the signal box in front of the depot, and began to work the hand signal system. All down the

[*Turn page*]

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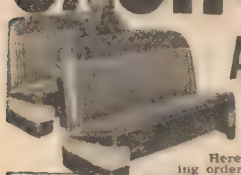

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tracks about half a mile, on some ten semaphore signals, a red arm came up to the horizontal. In the language of the railroad, this said:

Danger! All trains stop!

Hank Reagan hung around to watch the fireworks. Something loud was bound to happen when Conductor Darling caught those signals. Bowie got a lot paler and more nervous as the hands pointed around to four. He felt like praying, but he couldn't take the time.

Angry screaming of a steam whistle told them the Cherokee had caught the signal. Screeching of air brakes now said she was beginning to stop. It took quite a time to stop a train as fast as the Cherokee.

The engine and a couple of cars passed the station before she finally came to a dead stop. Bowie and Hank stood in front of the depot, and the first thing they spotted was a big fat man charging toward them like a bull.

"Where's the agent?" yelled the conductor, coming up.

Bowie stepped forward. "I'm acting for the agent."

"Where are the orders, son? Who the hell stopped this train?"

"I don't have orders, Mr. Darling. The wire's dead. There's been heavy rains in the Panamints. I feared a washout."

Steam seemed to come out of the fat man's mouth and nose. "Did I hear right?" he bellowed.

Bowie nodded. "I stopped her on my own say-so!"

The fat man looked as if he were going to blow a boiler.

"By the eternal, I'll skin you! A caution signal's enough, you measly runt!"

"I believe the telegraph's been washed out," Bowie said. "The tracks could be, too."

"You talk back to me, you—you—"

The fat man seized little Bowie by the tattered shirt and began to shake him as a terrier would a rat. The deputy sheriff stepped forward.

"That's enough, Mr. Darling. Bowie did what he thought best."

The conductor glared. "I ought to crack both your skulls!" He turned and yelled at the engineer. "Get her rolling, Joe. We'll make up this time, or my name's not Darling!" As he ran to the train, he yelled over his shoulder, "I'll keep that runt off railroad property, if it's the last thing I do!"

As the train began to move, Bowie walked inside the depot. It was a crushing blow. Darling carried a lot of weight with the railroad. Bowie figured it would be a cold day in June before they gave him a job. All his work and study for nothing.

Inside, Bowie heard something that made his heart race. The telegraph instrument was working. He rushed over and bent his head down. The message came through, faint but clear.

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Bowie swung around, trembling in every limb. The Cherokee Express was rushing by the depot. This train wasn't like the local freights. It had power and push and got away fast. But Bowie knew he had to get on her.

HE TORE out of the depot and saw about three cars yet to pass. His feet almost left the ground as he dashed in the direction the train was moving. He heard Hank Reagan yelling at him, but he threw himself at the iron rod on the last car and was whipped up on the steps with stunning force.

Bowie crawled up the steps and made another mighty jump for the air-brake line. He swung on it with his whole weight, for all the world like a kid playing on a clothes line. The screech of brakes almost deafened him, but he held on until she was dead-still.

Darling was mad enough to break him in two, and probably would have done it this time if Hank Reagan hadn't been there to interfere. Be-

[*Turn page*]

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tween the two of them they got the fat man calmed down enough to walk in the depot and get the orders for himself.

Bowie got through to Meigs Junction, and back came the orders from the general superintendent, still faint, to hold the Cherokee Express. Bowie could almost feel the relief on the other end as he told them he had held the fast transcontinental express.

Darling read the orders over a couple of times, and there was a deep flush on his fat face. He looked around, then extended a huge hand to the little fellow, and all his anger was gone.

"Son, I got to hand it to you for being on your toes. You're a real railroad man."

Bowie looked as if he were going to pass out. "W-what was that you s-said, Mr. Darling?" he chattered.

"You're all right. This road needs more good men like you. You saved the Express, and I won't forget it. I'll be honored to do you any favor I can in return."

Bowie felt like yelling. He had his job all picked out, and with a man like Conductor Darling backing him up, he knew he was going to make the grade.

"Thanks," he said, too choked up inside to say anything else.

Darling read the orders agin, then put his hand on Bowie's shoulder, just like one good friend to another.

"Son, let's go get a cup of coffee. I'd like to talk to a man who knows his railroading as well as you do."

There might have been a prouder man in the United States than little Bowie, but it was kind of doubtful. He grinned at the deputy sheriff who was taking it all in.

"Hank," he said, "you better have some coffee with Mr. Darlin' and me."

"I'll be right proud to," said Reagan.

And Hank really meant it, because all of a sudden little Bowie Ridgin had become a man of standing in his community. ● ● ●

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You enjoy big profits on BOTH materials and labor—after paying service men and salesmen. This is a year-round large-profit business. You have the cooperation of a **24 YEAR OLD** organization interested in your success. If you want you should inquire now, TODAY, to become the owner of a **DURACLEAN** Service business, while territory is still available.

What Dealers Say

W. Lookiebill: We've had 20 years of pleasant dealings. I'm 65 but am setting my sights for 20 more years.
Gerald Merriman: $700 cleaning . . 13 working days.
P. D. Freidinger: 70% of our business is repeat.
A. Ullman: Every demonstration has been a sale.
Ellsworth: Your advertising certainly has paid dividends.
M. Lassanske: My original investment was returned in about two months. I am not sorry in any way that I started my business 'on a shoe string.'
R. Kimbrough: Finished First White House of Confederacy and am to **Duraclean** the Governor's Mansion.
Margarette Turner: Took in $106 in 15 or 18 hours.
L. Johnson: Each customer leads to 3 or 4 more.
T. Kemori: We have 1,000,000 yen contract Duracleaning for U.S. Army in Japan.

EASY TERMS

A moderate payment establishes **your own** business—pay balance from sales. We furnish electric machines, folders, store cards, introduction slips, sales book, demonstrators and **enough material to return your TOTAL investment.** Your business can be operating in a few days. **Mail coupon today! No obligation.**

Duraclean Co.

4-692 Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Illinois

Nationally Advertised

Your services are Nationally Advertised in Life, McCall's, Better Homes & Gardens, Ladies Home Journal, House & Garden, Maclean's (Canada's largest magazine), etc. **See full-column ad in Jan. McCalls.**

FREE Booklet

Our first letter and illustrated booklet will explain everything —the two modern, urgently needed services, waiting market, how business grows, your large profit, easy terms and PROTECTED territory. **Send Coupon** TODAY!

"OWN a Business" Coupon

DURACLEAN CO.
4-692 Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Illinois

With no obligation to me, send booklet and letter giving full details. Tell me how I may OWN a growing business of my own built upon satisfied customers.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

CHEW IMPROVED FORMULA CHEWING GUM! REDUCE

Up to 5 lbs. a Week With Dr. Phillips Plan

Reduce to a slimmer more graceful figure the way Dr. Phillips recommends—without starving—without missing a single meal! Here for you *Now*—a scientific way which guarantees you can lose as much weight as you wish—or *you pay nothing!* No Drugs, No Starvation, No Exercises or Laxatives. The Amazing thing is that it is so easy to follow—simple and safe to lose those ugly, fatty bulges. Each and every week you lose pounds safely until you reach the weight that most becomes you. Now at last you have the doctors' new modern way to reduce—To acquire that dreamed about silhouette, an improved slimmer, exciting more graceful figure. Simply chew delicious improved Formula Dr. Phillips Kelpidine Chewing Gum and follow Dr. Phillips Plan. This wholesome, tasty delicious Kelpidine Chewing Gum contains Hexitol, *reduces* appetite and is sugar free. Hexitol is a new discovery and contains no fat and no available carbohydrates. Enjoy chewing this delicious gum and reduce with Dr. Phillips Plan. Try it for 12 days, then step on the scale. You'll hardly believe your eyes. Good for men too.

$1 12 DAY SUPPLY ONLY

Money-Back Guarantee! 10 Day Free Trial!

Mail the coupon now! Test the amazing Dr. Phillips KELPIDINE CHEWING GUM REDUCING PLAN for 10 days at our expense. If after 10 days your friends, your mirror and your scale do not tell you that you have lost weight and look slimmer you pay nothing.

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Just mail us your name and address, and $1.00 cash, check or money-order. You will receive a 12 day supply of KELPIDINE CHEWING GUM (improved Formula), and Dr. Phillips Reducing Plan postage prepaid.

NAME..... ADDRESS.....

STATE..... CITY.....

☐ Send me Special 24 day supply and FREE 12 day package for $2.00. I understand that if I am not delighted with KELPIDINE CHEWING GUM and Dr. Phillips Reducing Plan, I can return in 10 days for full purchase price refund.

SENT ON APPROVAL — MAIL COUPON NOW!